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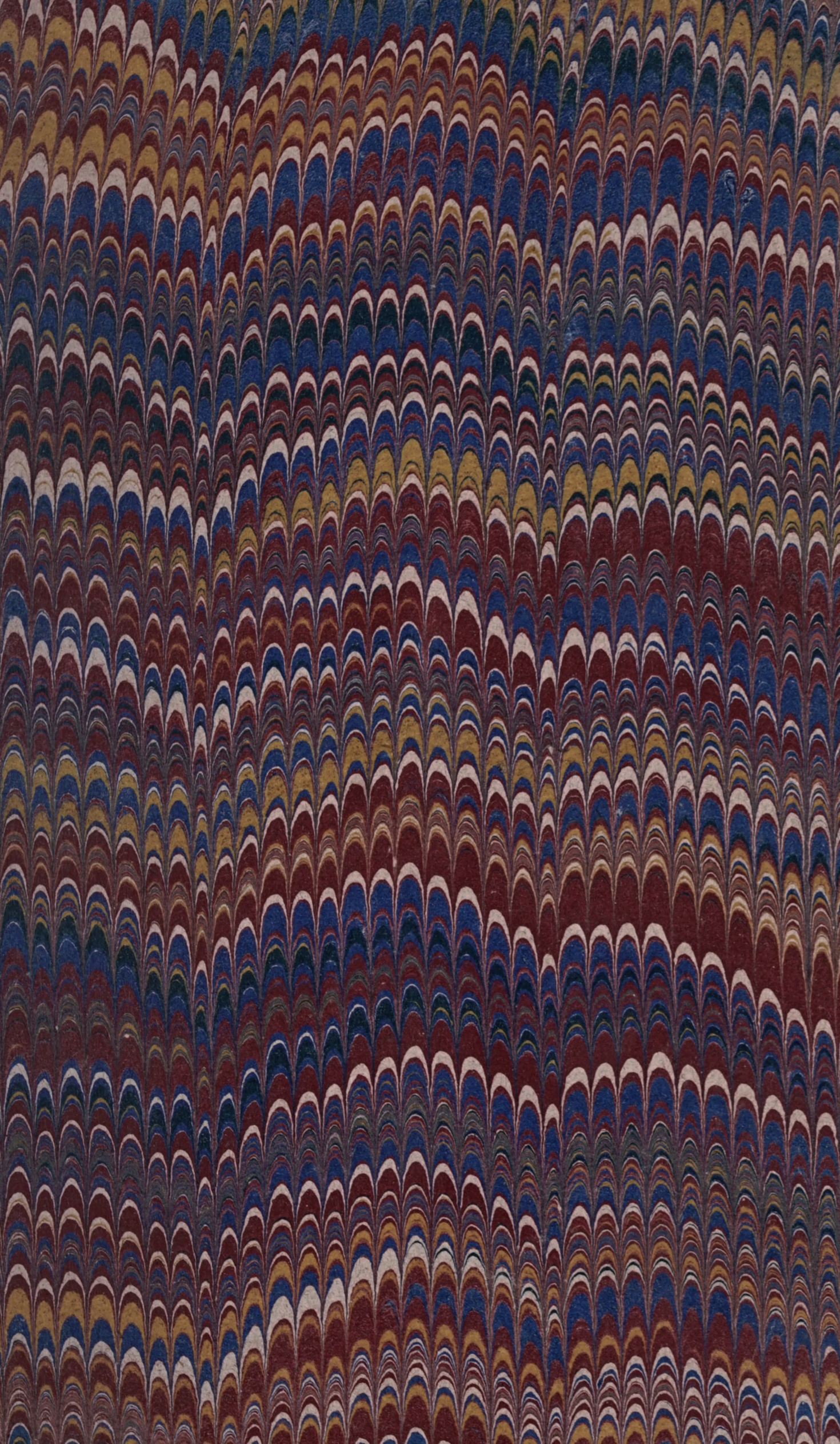
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Pocket Edition.

A Bitter Reckoning.

By the author of "By Crooked Paths," "Bred
in the Bone," Etc., Etc.

17 TO 27 VANDEWATER ST
"NEW YORK."

George Munro

PUBLISHED

THE SEASIDE LIBRARY.—POCKET EDITION.

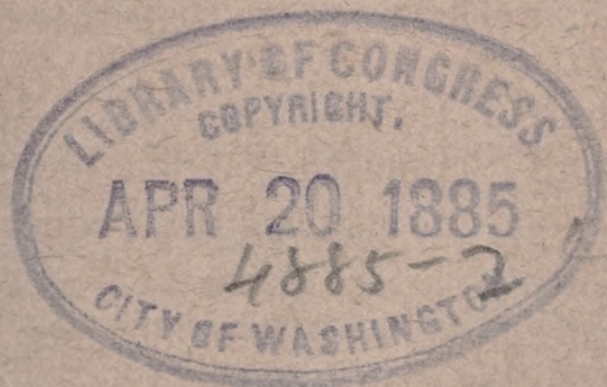
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A BITTER RECKONING.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"By Crooked Paths," "Bred in the Bone," etc.

James Payn



NEW YORK:
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A BITTER RECKONING.

CHAPTER I.

"I KNOW how silly it is of me to fret over this separation of a few weeks, Jack; but I'm suffering from that most feminine of all feminine ailments—a presentiment. I have a horrible dread that you will not come back to me just the same as you leave me."

Jack Dornton knew this was all very foolish. He loved pretty Ethel Mallett very dearly; so, instead of putting his thought into words, he kissed the tearful face, and lovingly comforted her with vows of eternal constancy most fitting to the occasion.

"You know I needn't stay down there until the pictures are finished," he said presently, when he had succeeded in soothing her agitation. "As soon as I have the sketches well forward, I shall come back and complete the larger pictures from them at home; and, though I shall be working very hard, that will not prevent you from coming every day to watch my progress and cheer me up for an hour or so in the afternoon."

Ethel smiled—it was rather a pitiful attempt—and turned resolutely to the breakfast-table.

"It was good of you to think of coming to breakfast with us, so that we might see the last of you before starting," she said bravely, as she busied herself with the coffee-cups; and Jack felt thankful that the scene he had been dreading for the last few days was over.

Mr. Mallett came down a few moments later, and breakfast was got through with due decorum, in deference to "papa's dislike to emotion."

Shortly after the meal, Jack was tramping down Holborn—the house he had left was in the neighborhood of Bloomsbury—his portmanteau in one hand and a portable easel in the other.

He had been engaged to Ethel Mallett for two months, and they were to be married as soon as he could provide a suitable home for her. A fortnight after he had obtained the reluctant consent of Mr. Mallett to this arrangement, a certain Lord Summers, attracted, as he said, by two water-colors of Jack's in a fashionable gallery, had found him out and offered him a liberal commission to execute a series of six pictures, the subjects to be selected from the immediate neighborhood of his lordship's place in Exbridgeshire. Jack had jumped at the offer, seeing that it would enable him to place little Ethel in a home of her own months sooner than he had anticipated.

So here he was, after a two hours' run from Fenchurch Street, hard at work in the woods of Mallingford, skillfully and rapidly

filling in the leading features of Mallingford House and its surroundings.

While his fingers were thus busy, he was recalling the conversation he had had with Lord Summers upon the place of his first subject.

"Would you wish me to begin with Summerfield?" Jack had asked, when taking his final instructions from his lordship.

"No; I should like to be at Summerfield myself when you are there. I think you had better make Mallingford House your first subject. It is about ten miles from Summerfield, and you can work your way toward there. I shall be down by the last week in July, and hope to have the pleasure of showing you some hospitality."

Jack bowed his thanks.

"You will be delighted with Mallingford," his lordship went on, after a pause. "It is a noble place, and I have a rather peculiar interest in the property. The late owner, Sir Paul Malling, was a most eccentric man, with a very exalted notion of his own importance as head of the house. He had never married, and was mortally offended with his brother Geoffrey because he took unto himself a wife at the age of thirty-eight without first consulting him. Poor Paul! He was a great friend of mine; but I'm bound to confess that he was of a most unforgiving disposition. Would you believe it, Mr. Dornton? He was so unjust as to disinherit Geoffrey—the estate was not entailed, unfortunately—and leave the whole of his property to his only sister's only child, Pauline Lufton. His will confirmed his reputation for eccentricity, for he made even her inheritance conditional: first, upon her taking the name of Malling—and her husband also, should she marry—and, secondly, upon her not marrying under the age of twenty-five without her guardian's approval and consent. A very awkward thing for the guardian! I am that not-to-be-envied person. So, you see, should the young lady in question happen to fall in love with some poor beggar of a fellow, I could not consistently give my consent, and she would have to give up either her love or her position as owner of Mallingford, one of the finest seats in the county."

"In which case?" Jack said interrogatively.

"In which case the disinherited brother would have his own. But I am glad to say that my charming ward will be twenty-five in September, and will then be in a position to please herself in her choice of a husband—for which I am devoutly thankful, as it relieves me of a serious responsibility."

"I can quite understand that."

"I was in hopes at first that I should not be called upon to exercise my guardianship at all, for, when Sir Paul died, Pauline was away with her father in Italy. He was a sad reprobate, and spent his time chiefly in low gambling-houses, leaving his motherless girl among all kinds of questionable people. I always think it was a mercy she did not come to any harm. Well, as fate willed, this Lufton died just a month before Sir Paul, and, though we made every effort to find his daughter, we could obtain no tidings of her. We traced the father and daughter to Naples, where the former died; but after that we could hear nothing of her. We sent out

agents, we advertised, we did everything we could. At last, after five months of fruitless inquiry, and just as we were losing heart, and wondering whether we should not begin to hunt up poor Geoffrey, she appeared suddenly at my solicitors' offices. She looked wretchedly ill, said she had been working her heart out as a teacher of English at a Spanish convent, and had only recently seen one of our advertisements. She was nineteen then—and that is nearly six years ago. Bless my heart," exclaimed his lordship, as he looked at his watch, "it is two o'clock, and I have kept you here with my twaddle a whole hour! I'm sure I beg your pardon, Mr. Dornton."

"Not at all," Jack answered. "On the contrary, I was quite interested in the romance."

And now, as Jack Dornton stood in the shady wood, with the noonday sun making little patches of white here and there wherever it could pierce the thick foliage above, and with a buzzing of insects in his ears, he was weaving all sorts of romantic fancies concerning the owner of all the beauty surrounding him.

The long, low, irregular house, built of gleaming white stone, the vivid patches of color on the slopes of the terrace, the almost painful brilliancy of the fountains as they danced and glittered in the sunlight, made up a picture in which intensity of color was the predominant feature.

Jack had given a despairing sigh when he first came upon the house.

"If I paint that as it really is," he thought, "every one will accuse me of ridiculous idealism. I must get shadow of some sort from somewhere;" and that was why he was painting his picture in a spot where soft heavy foliage gave some relief to the brightness of the whole place. "It looks well enough from here," he muttered discontentedly; "but it looks almost heartless with its self-assertive brilliancy of coloring and aggressive rigidity of outline, when one first comes upon it. I shall have to call this picture 'A peep from Mallingford Woods,' for there's as much of wood as of anything else in it. Odd that the owner of such a place as this should never have married!" was his next thought. "Lord Summers says she is a beauty as well as an heiress. Perhaps she is in love with some poor beggar, as he said, and is waiting until she is twenty-five to lay herself and her fortune at the lucky fellow's feet. By Jove, what a woman! That is the sort of thing Ethel would do—my true-hearted, unselfish, loving little Ethel!"

Jack looked very handsome as he stood with palette and brush in hand, his face lighted up with happy thoughts of his pretty and trusting sweetheart. He had bright blue eyes, well-formed features, and a short brown beard, whilst his shoulders were those of a modern Hercules. He stood six feet high, and was proportionately built. Taken altogether, he was a very attractive young man in the eyes of the softer sex.

From behind the bole of a large tree Jack Dornton was being narrowly scanned by a young lady, who seemed well pleased with the inspection. She watched him at work for some minutes with a decided look of admiration in her eyes. She turned from her survey presently, and, stooping down, crept away slowly among the brush-

wood, making a detour with the evident intention of reaching the spot again.

In the meantime Jack grew hungry, and, not having made provision against such an emergency, he did what most men would have done in similar circumstances—lighted his pipe and puffed away energetically at it. Looking round and stretching himself after his spell of work, he noticed a small natural mound covered with soft velvety grass. The more he looked at this mound, the stronger became the temptation to take ten minutes' rest upon it. He yielded at last, and found the mound an excellent pillow.

Before he had enjoyed two of the allotted ten minutes' rest, his open locket, containing a portrait of Ethel, dropped from his hand, his pipe slipped from between his teeth, and a myriad of gnats buzzed and whizzed in happy freedom round his head. Jack Dorton was fast asleep!

At that moment a woman came gliding by in full view of the easel. She was a woman of surpassing loveliness, tall, stately, with a figure of voluptuous perfection, a mass of golden plaits coiled round and round her head, full melting brown eyes and ripe red lips, a skin rivaling the peach in its delicate coloring, and a carriage queenly in its every movement. Her dainty cambric gown, cunningly made to "more express than hide her form," trailed carelessly among the ivy-roots and brambles behind her. Her simple straw hat she carried in her hand, and her whole air suggested the pretty "maiden meditation fancy free."

She gave a well-feigned start when she had come well in view of Jack's easel.

It was not pleasant to watch the swift change that came over the beautiful face as she marked the vacant seat and thought herself alone. It revealed unmistakably the defects of her character as indicated in the slightly sensual under lip, the cruel little curves at the corners of the mouth, which were generally safely concealed beneath the pretty confiding smile that from long practice had become habitual with her.

Advancing cautiously, she glanced around, and soon discovered Jack's whereabouts. She went quickly to the easel, and critically examined the morning's work. Turning aside, she remarked to herself, "With such decided talent and such an appearance, he would be sure to succeed if he were properly taken up." She then walked on tip-toe to Jack, and scrutinized him quite as critically as she had scrutinized his work, and evidently with as much approval.

"He would be a pleasant enough medium *pour passer le temps* until the end of the week." And, as the thought passed through her mind, her quick eye detected the open locket by his side.

She looked carefully at the sleeper, and having assured herself of the soundness of his slumbers, went down upon her knees by his side, the better to examine the portrait.

She started visibly when her eyes fell upon the sweet face smiling at her from the tiny trinket. She rose quickly, and walked away a few yards.

"So she is this landscape-painter's 'village maiden'!" she muttered vindictively. "Surely there is some fatality in his coming here! I can't be mistaken; it is the same insipid babyishly pretty

face that Lord Summers pointed out to me in the park the other day. And she loves this Apollo, does she? And perhaps he thinks he loves her. Well, we shall see what we shall see!"

There was a significant glitter in her fine eyes, and an instantaneous tightening of the red lips seemed to tell of a hard cruel heart beneath the fair exterior.

But the almost demoniacal expression of her face disappeared as if by magic when Jack rolled over on to his side and showed signs of waking.

She had posed gracefully before the easel, and awaited him.

"I believe I've been asleep," he murmured drowsily, raising himself on one elbow, and feeling about instinctively for his pipe.

Not finding it, he turned over lazily to prosecute his search on the other side, when his eyes fell upon the dazzling loveliness of the girl so earnestly regarding his picture; and in that first glimpse of Pauline Mallings Jack's senses and aristocratic perceptions were alike roused.

He lay still for an instant looking at her, afraid to move, lest this woodland nymph should be a dream, and vanish with his waking.

The little flecks of sunlight were dancing about her as she stood in rapt attention before the unfinished picture, now bringing into prominence the exquisite symmetry of her form, now kissing the well-formed head and bringing into play the "living gold" of her luxuriant hair.

Jack noted all this with a painter's eye, and, springing to his feet, went toward his easel.

"I beg your pardon for the liberty I have taken in examining your picture," murmured the woodland nymph melodiously. "I hope I did not disturb you; you seemed so tired! May I be allowed to continue my inspection?"

Jack, hardly awake even yet, muttered something about "too much honor."

"You are Mr. Dornton, are you not?" she continued, still looking at the picture, and giving Jack time to "pull himself together." "Lord Summers told me he was going to ask you to make a picture of my house."

It was Miss Mallings then, and no woodland nymph, after all. Jack felt disappointed, though he could not tell why.

"I suppose you will remain here for some days. May I offer you a little hospitality during your stay? The village inns are, I believe, wretchedly uncomfortable, and I should not like a friend of my guardian's to be driven to their shelter while I am at home. We are two lonely women just now, and but dull company, I fear; but we will do our best to make you comfortable for this week at least. Next week I am off again until the end of the season, and shall have to leave you to the mercies of the servants. I came down only for a peep at my flowers, now in their pride. Say you will come."

"Thank you very much," Jack began hesitatingly; "but I did not anticipate—in fact, I made no preparation—"

"Is that the only difficulty?" she interrupted gently. "Pray don't let that stand in the way. Mrs. Sefton and I will shut our eyes to the enormity of a morning coat at dinner, and will promise to think no less of you on that account; so we shall expect you."

We dine at half past seven when *en famille*, so that we may have an hour or two of these lovely summer evenings in the gardens. Until then, *au revoir!*”

Jack raised his soft felt hat, and watched her graceful figure as she glided away down the dim leafy vista of the wood. He wished that she had stayed longer, that he might still be looking into her glorious eyes, watching the ever-changing lights that came and went as rapidly as scudding clouds across a summer sky. When at last a curve in the path hid her from view he turned again to his work with a heavy sigh, wishing it were already half past seven.

CHAPTER II.

“Now you are to consider yourself quite *chez vous*, Mr. Dornton,” Miss Malling said, as she rose from table. “Stay and meditate here in solitude, or come and smoke a cigar in our company on the terrace, as suits your inclination. I always like my visitors to make themselves happy in their own way.”

So Jack, preferring society to solitude, smoked his after-dinner cigar on the terrace, or rather he began it, but very soon threw it away, the better to continue a conversation that Miss Malling purposely led into artistic channels.

On the first night she did not talk much of herself—in fact, she seldom did. It was her habit to repose in graceful, luxurious indolence, and listen intelligently to others, now and again filling up a gap, or, when the conversational ball showed signs of stopping, setting it rolling again by a short, well-directed remark, and expressing her interest in the subject under discussion more by a liberal use of her eloquent eyes and brows than by speech.

One of her warmest admirers observed of her that, though she did not talk much, no one, on the other hand, could accuse her of talking folly. And this habit of silence was due more to indolence than inability. Miss Malling, when once roused to interest, could distance most women in her grasp of a subject and her power of putting her ideas into forcible language.

Jack was charmed by her soft, womanly reticence, and flattered by her marked deference to his opinion in all matters.

“Of course, it is not personal deference to my views, but her tacit admission of the mental superiority of man over woman,” this Solon of twenty-five remarked to himself.

The moon came out by and by, throwing from behind a curtain of tender gray clouds a soft, silvery, shimmering light over the landscape.

After Mrs. Sefton had gone indoors, Pauline led the conversation in a manner that quite entranced her companion. The witchery of the evening, the beauty of the woman, and the spell of her fascinations wrought upon Jack’s impressionable nature, and his dreams that night were of lovely women with golden hair and liquid brown eyes.

A week later, Jack Dornton stood at the breakfast-room window, apparently absorbed in the calm, radiant beauty of the scene before

him; yet, as he stood there outwardly calm, his breast was torn with conflicting passions.

Pauline Malling was returning to town by the midday train, and the pain that her proposed departure had caused him had also opened his eyes to the hateful truth that he had been unfaithful to his little Ethel's memory in thought, if not in word.

"What a blind fool I have been," he told himself, wrathfully, "to stay here day after day, and not see my own danger! Miss Malling has been very kind and gentle; but I dare say she looks upon me as belonging to a very inferior class to her own; and I, to show my gratitude, must return her womanly kindness by forgetting the distance between us, and presuming to fall in love with her! Besotted idiot! Apart from my supreme conceit with regard to Miss Malling, I have behaved shamefully to Ethel," he went on; and a flush of self-condemnation crept over his handsome face. "I've been away from her a whole week, and only one short note have I sent her. I'm an awful brute!"

He seated himself at the writing-table in the window, seized a pen and began:

"My darling Ethel—"

Then he stopped and nibbled the pen-noider, as if in expectation of receiving inspiration from the act. Before he had quite made up his mind as to the wording of his overdue love-letter he heard a rustle at the door, and Miss Malling entered in her elegant traveling costume.

It was all very well for Jack to propound platitudes when he was alone, but it was not quite another thing to act up to them in the presence of this golden-haired siren. She was in a perfectly irresistible mood to-day; her laughter was gone, and she was tender, sentimental, and arch by turns.

"How shall I miss your pleasant little morning chats, Mr. Dorn-ton"—with a gentle sigh—"our happy sketching expeditions, and our delightful evenings!"

"You can not miss them as I shall," Jack returned.

"You think not?" raising her eyes slowly to his and dropping her voice mournfully. "That shows how little you know and appreciate your gain in possessing the hearty love and esteem of a few true friends, instead of the monotonous adulation of a horde of mere fashionable acquaintances. You can not understand, because you have never experienced it, how the emptiness of our lives sometimes palls upon us butterflies; how it depresses us, and what we would give at such times to have a real object in life; how we long for the affection of one disinterested creature!"

Here Jack would have precipitated himself bodily into the yawning chasm she had so conveniently opened for him, but for the providential entrance of Mrs. Sefton, who proceeded to dispense the comforts of the breakfast-table in her own inimitable manner. No one ate much, and the carriage was at the door before the meal was properly over.

"Good-by, Mr. Dorn-ton," said Pauline, as she stood with one dainty foot upon the step. "I shall hope to find you here when I return; and I fear," she continued, again lowering her voice danger-

ously, "I shall not be able to endure much of London's vapid society after the intellectual intercourse we have enjoyed lately. I shall be back in a fortnight. You will not forget me in that time?"

Forget her! As Jack turned into the house, after watching the carriage down the drive, his head and heart were on fire with the memory of her last lingering look, and the blood danced in his fingers as he recalled the warm, clinging pressure of her hand at parting.

"I think I must be mad when she is near me, for somehow I always manage to believe in the possibility of her love for me when in her presence," he muttered, remorsefully. "And, if she did love me, what then? Could I be such a brute as to throw Ethel over? My sweet, pure little Ethel, it would break her heart! I must get rid of this folly. I'll finish Ethel's letter at once, and send it off by the morning post. I'll write a long, loving letter to the poor little girl; it will do me as much good to write it as it will her to receive it. Confound it! Where is the one I began gone to? I'm sure I left it here in the portfolio!"

But it was not to be found. Vexed at his loss he began another. This time he commenced with "My dear Ethel," and then, before proceeding further, he made a close examination of the beautifully executed address and crest on the paper.

The crest of "Mallyngs"—as the name was originally spelled—a tiger's head and front paws in repose, with the motto, "Let the sleeping lie," particularly interested him. He had stood for many a minute during the past week in front of one of these emblems of the family circle—fierce, ungovernable passion—and pondered the probable events that had caused it to be bestowed on them as their badge.

The crest on the backs of the chairs in the hall especially pleased him. They were very beautiful specimens of oak-carving, and formed the extreme point of the high backs. The carver had caught to a marvel the combination of intense indolence, softness, and dormant power which such a subject should express, and Jack had even gone the length of fancying a likeness between the beautiful, cruel, sleeping beasts and the present representatives of the race they typified.

"I wonder why she has never married?" he mused. "I wonder if mine is the true reason, and there really is some poor beggar in the background awaiting her twenty-fifty birthday? I shall have a chance of finding out if I accept her invitation for the partridge-shooting in September, for Lord Summers told me she would be twenty-five in that month. Ought I, in justice to Ethel, to place myself in the way of such temptation? Bosh! I must be a weak fool indeed if I can not live in the society of a beautiful woman without making an ass of myself! Besides if I come and see for myself that she is really 'gone' on some lucky fellow, it will be the most complete cure I could find for my own folly."

But Jack knew this to be false reasoning; nevertheless he would not listen to conscience, and, with a gloomy brow and tightly compressed lips, sat glaring moodily at the blank sheet of paper before him, looking very unlike the honest, hearty Jack Dornton who but a short week ago bade good-by to his sweetheart in Bloomsbury.

"Will you take your luncheon in here, sir? It will seem less lonely than in the dining-room, I think."

Jack looked up in surprise at the housekeeper.

"Is it luncheon-time?"

"It is just on two o'clock, sir."

"I must have been sitting here nearly three hours. I don't mind where I lunch, Mrs. Perkins."

"Then I'll put it in here, sir; it's brighter and more cheerful than the dining-room."

Mrs. Perkins walked to a sideboard and flicked away an imaginary speck of dust.

"I can not get those girls to be thorough in their dusting," she observed, apologetically; then, in a more conversational tone she went on: "Fine place, Mallingsford Park, isn't it, sir?—though not kept up as it used to be in Sir Paul's time. A big place like this wants a master—that's certain!"

Jack resigned himself to the inevitable.

"Were you here in Sir Paul's time?" he asked, more because the old lady wanted to talk than from any interest he took in the matter.

"Bless you, sir, I've been a servant in this house for turned fifty years! I began as under-housemaid at sixteen, and here I've been ever since; so I'm what you may call an old servant."

"Yes, indeed!" Jack agreed, politely.

"And, like most old servants, I've seen many changes in my time."

"No doubt."

Then there was a pause; and, as the old lady showed no sign of going, Jack forced the interest he did not feel, and asked a question.

"Of course you remember Miss Mallings's mother? She must have been a beautiful woman."

"Sometimes she was and sometimes she wasn't. She was handsome enough naturally; but she had such an awful temper that it quite disfigured her at times. I've known her to sulk about the house for a month at a time because her brother, the late Sir Paul, had refused her some trifling thing. We were quite relieved when she got married, and went away on the Continent with her husband. You see she was many years younger than her brothers, Sir Paul and the present baronet, Sir Geoffrey, and was a bit spoiled in consequence—though there is an old saying in the family that a Mallings's daughter is always a fiend, asking your pardon for the word, sir; so it's lucky Miss Pauline is only a Mallings by adoption."

"Then you think she has escaped the failing usual to the ladies of the family?"

Mrs. Perkins gave Jack a very sharp glance as he put this question, and answered, cautiously:

"I should not like to give an opinion of my mistress's disposition. It would be very bad taste on my part, sir. Miss Mallings, during the six years she has been mistress here, has been everything one could desire."

Jack smiled under his mustache.

"I beg your pardon," he said, politely. "I did not wish to

betray you into disrespect for Miss Malling. My question was the natural outcome of your remark as to Miss Malling's being only a Malling by adoption."

The housekeeper's face cleared.

"To be sure, sir; and that takes me back to what I was saying. Miss Pauline's mother went away on the Continent with her husband directly after they were married, and roamed about for years from one country to another with him; she never came home again, poor dear! She died when Miss Pauline was fifteen years old; and then Sir Paul was anxious to have the child with him in England, as he had made her his heiress, in consequence of the other brother, Geoffrey, having married without his consent. But Major Lufton would not part with his daughter, and refused even to let her come on a visit; so we none of us ever saw Miss Pauline until she came here, a grown woman, to take her place as mistress of Mallingford."

"I suppose you knew her at once by her likeness to her mother?"

"Strange to say, we didn't, sir! To be sure she was very ill, for her father had been dead six months before she heard a word about being heiress to this property, and all that time, to keep herself from starving, she had been slaving in some Spanish convent. But even as she recovered her looks we watched in vain for something in the voice or the expression of the face that should remind us of her mother. There are the same beautiful hair and eyes, and there the likeness ends."

"Do you say she never knew about her heiress-ship until after her father's death?"

"Yes, sir. She says he would not tell her because he was afraid she might be tempted to leave him. I believe they were in dreadful straits sometimes. The major gambled away his quarterly allowance as soon as he received it, and I'm afraid they were often hard-driven for a meal."

"It must have been a wonderful change for her when she came here?"

"It was indeed, sir—so great that she can never to this day bear to recall that dreadful time, and refuses to talk about it to any one. She says it was quite bad enough while it lasted, and she does not wish it to be immortalized by constant repetition."

Then, having said all she wished to say for the present, Mrs. Perkins looked at the clock, and, expressing surprise at the lateness of the hour, hurried away to get Jack's luncheon.

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CHAPTER III.

ETHEL MALLET knelt on a chair, her bonny face pressing closely against the window-pane. The room being on the second floor, it was only by so doing that she could see the steps that led up to the front door. It was a quarter past eight, and she was watching anxiously, as she had done for several mornings past, for the coming of the postman. She left her position presently, and bustled about, putting little finishing touches to the breakfast-table, setting a vase of roses close by her father's plate, putting a few sprigs of green

round the butter, refolding the *serviettes*, and arranging the cups and saucers so as to hide an ugly coffee-stain of the previous day.

"It is hard on poor dear dad to have to put up with these petty inconveniences," she said, affectionately, as she laid the morning newspaper next the roses, and looked to see if she could do anything further to beautify the unlovely lodging-house breakfast-table. "I know the sight of a stain on the table-cloth takes away his appetite. With the very next few shillings I make by my copying I'll buy a couple of table-cloths, and then we can have an extra one without asking Mrs. Philpott for it and risking black looks for the rest of the week. Oh, here you are, papa! I thought you were going to be late—and it is your Kensington day, too. Ah, there's the postman! I wonder if he has a letter for me? I think he must have to-day—don't you, dear? Isn't it strange that Jack has written only once in a whole week?"

"Young fellows always find plenty of occupation in the country; you must not worry about it, my child." This remark was rather uncalled for, as Ethel, the whole week through, had scrupulously avoided mentioning the subject of Jack's neglect, bearing in mind her father's dislike to worry in all shape and form. "The country round Mallingford is particularly attractive, and I can quite understand that Jack is feasting his soul on its beauties."

"Oh, papa, do you know Mallingford? You never said so before!"—and Ethel was just about to launch out into a string of questions, when her thoughts were diverted by the appearance of the servant with the fish for breakfast, and a letter.

"For me, and from Jack!" she exclaimed, breathlessly; but she did not attempt to read it until she had attended to every little want of her father's, and seen him comfortably settled for his morning's glance over the leaders in the newspaper.

Then she took up the letter and began reading it. As she read, the sweet anticipation of pleasure faded slowly from her face, and she laid the epistle down, looking perplexed and troubled. She went on quietly eating—or pretending to eat—her breakfast, filled her father's cup when he pushed it toward her, and resolutely kept silence until he had laid down his newspaper, and caught her wistful look.

Mr. Mallett was a decidedly selfish man, irritable under small annoyances, and avoiding them by all possible means; but he loved his bright-eyed girl very dearly. It was much against his will that he had been cajoled into consenting to the engagement between his daughter and Jack Dornton, having his own private reasons for looking upon the match as unsuitable in many ways. But Ethel had fallen in love with the handsome young artist, who had so generously undertaken the supervision of the whole of her father's pupils at a time when he had been confined to the house by a touch of bronchitis; so Mr. Mallett accepted the inevitable gracefully, and—more to avoid the sight of his daughter's grief than from any more sufficient cause—agreed to receive Jack as his future son-in-law. As he looked across the breakfast-table this morning, and noted the sad curve of Ethel's lips, the pathetic glance of her eyes, and her generally subdued air, he felt angry with Jack, thoroughly angry,

knowing that it must be his letter that had clouded her bright face. But he did not show his annoyance at once.

"Well, what are you waiting to say?"

"I don't quite know; Jack has written a nice, long letter, and yet I am disappointed. I'm never satisfied: am I, dad? He tells me here that he's very lonely, and a line or two lower down he says that Miss Malling, of whom he gave such a glowing description in his first note, has left for London. I know I'm a narrow-minded, jealous little idiot; but I can't help fancying that it's more her absence than mine that makes him lonely. As if I did not know Jack to be one of the most honorable men in the world! Please call me a few hard names, dad, and make me ashamed of myself."

But Mr. Mallett did nothing of the sort.

"I think it extremely bad taste on Jack's part to fill his letters to you with descriptions of another woman's beauty."

"Now, there you are wrong! It's just that that satisfies me as to Jack's good faith. Yes, you may shrug your shoulders as high as you like; but, if there was one scrap of unfairness to me in his admiration for Miss Malling, he would not write so openly about it. It was only my nonsense about being jealous, you know."

"You are a veritable little bee, sucking the honey and leaving the poison. I'll not say one word against your hero, my dear. But I don't like to hear of any slight being put upon you. You know I don't think him worthy of my little girl."

"You conceited old dad," Ethel said, with a smile, "to think your girl better than any one else's! Why, Jack is much too good for me! Even you admit he's clever."

"Granted. But who is he? He has a straight nose and a good pair of shoulders; but what was his grandfather? Have you ever asked him?"

"Papa! What an extraordinary question that would be for me to ask him! I dare say his grandfather was as good a man as mine."

"My dear, your grandfather was one of the oldest commoners in England. The Mallings of Mallingsford hold themselves among the best people in Exbridgeshire."

Ethel looked at her father as if she feared his reason had given way.

"I dare say you are very astonished; you will be, naturally. You have always known me as a hard-working drawing-master, and of course concluded I had never been anything else. My dear, that Mallingsford Park, of which Jack writes so enthusiastically, is mine by all just laws of succession. But my elder brother, the late owner, cut me off with a shilling, as people say, because I annoyed him about a trifling matter, and left the whole property to my niece, your cousin, Pauline Lufton."

"And I am eighteen, and this is the first word I have ever heard of it!"

"Yes, and most likely the last, for it is a subject I don't care to talk about. To dwell continually on what might have been would only make us discontented with what is. I don't think I should have spoken of it now if I had not felt extremely annoyed with Jack for his ungentlemanlike neglect during the past week. You are as

well-born as—perhaps better than—this cousin of yours of whom he raves, and I will not allow him to slight you in any way.”

“Daddy, will you let me manage this matter myself? You have so surprised me by what you have just said that I am almost bewildered, and can hardly think of anything else. But I am sure that I am too self-conceited to let Jack really slight me. If I thought he wanted me to give him his freedom, I would do it at once. I think it would almost break my heart, but I would do it. I would not bestow myself where I was lightly thought of.”

“Heaven bless my child! I can trust you to support the family reputation for self-respect; and, Ethel, if you are writing to Jack to-day, don’t touch on that subject. I have reasons for not wishing him to know anything about the matter until I tell him myself.”

“Very well, papa.”

But Ethel looked disappointed. She handed her father his hat and gloves, and kissed her hand to him from the window as he turned the corner of the street, and then went back to her letter. She read it through more than once, her face wearing a thoughtful expression. Then she sat down with loosely clasped hands, thinking over the letter even when she had returned it to her pocket.

“I am sure of it—he loves this Miss Mallings! Papa did not call her by that name. I forget now what he called her; but it was not Mallings. I thought my dislike to parting with Jack was all nonsensical fancy at the time; but I know now it was a real forewarning of this sorrow. He will never come back just the same as he went, even if he gets over this fancy for her. Jack—dear old Jack—why—why did you speak of your love for me until you were quite—quite certain you could never care for any one else? Oh, Jack, I can’t let you go, dear!”

The tears were coming; she pressed her face more closely against the dingy cushions of the couch, and choked back the sobs. There was a different look on her face when she raised it again.

“If it is as I think—if he is really falling in love with this beautiful woman—I shall release him very quickly from his engagement to me. I should not like him to blame himself in any way for his conduct toward me; I would rather he should think me heartless and fickle than that he should secretly pity me in his heart. I do not want his pity.”

She sat rigidly upright for a moment, with her lips firmly set and a bright, hard look in her pretty gray eyes; then suddenly the determination faded from her face, and with a heart-broken little cry she threw herself once more upon the cushions.

“Oh, Jack, how could you, when I love you so very dearly?”

CHAPTER IV.

BABETTE’S arms and back ached almost beyond endurance, yet the brush continued to play over Pauline Mallings’s hair as it hung in luxuriant profusion down her back.

Pauline was deep in thought, for the Duke of Bennoir had just sent her the exquisite bunch of roses she held in her hand, with the little note lying open on the table, and she was making up her

mind as to whether she should accept or reject the offer she knew he would make when he called by and by. She had intended that he should bring matters to a climax at once when she danced with him on the previous night, and she was now smiling to herself in lazy enjoyment as she saw how exactly her wishes were coming to pass. Babette, her French maid, caught the reflection of the smile in the glass, and wondered what mischief was on foot. The smile of gratified vanity was still on Miss Mallings's face as she asked:

"Did I look really well last night, Babette?"

"Mademoiselle knows she always looks well; but last night she was *bien bien, charmante!*" exclaimed Babette, theatrically, seizing the opportunity to rest her tired arms for a moment, by clasping her hands to give point to her admiration.

"Yes, I think that last dress of Rosalie's was a success. I can still afford to give the *débutantes* a start when I choose to make myself pleasant."

"Mademoiselle is irresistible when she chooses," murmured the Frenchwoman; and for a while the brushing went on uninterruptedly.

Miss Mallings again relapsed into deep thought.

"If I could only be sure of the past remaining the past, if I were only certain that ugly facts would not turn up unexpectedly to face me, I would marry this poor creature with a title—I would, if only to save me from myself. Surely, after six years of safety and prosperity, I am never going to be such an utter idiot as to risk loss of everything, because this poor painter is good-looking and charmingly candid! Have I never met a man before who combined honorable feelings and good looks, that I go down at once, surrender before the first shot is fired, to this young man with blue eyes and a bright smile? I suppose this is what goody-goody people would call 'swift retribution.' They would declare triumphantly that my sin had brought its own punishment. I hate myself for my weakness! Only ten days ago I began this flirtation for my own amusement and to annoy that big-eyed, pale-faced child, to give her a few unhappy hours as a set-off against the perpetual anxiety her mere existence causes me, and, before I am certain that either of these purposes is accomplished, I wake up to the humiliating knowledge that I am caught in my own trap, that for the first time in my life I have fallen in love! Ye gods—fallen in love!"

She burst into a shout of scornful laughter, so startling Babette that the ivory-backed brush flew out of her hand, and she stood with round eyes and open mouth regarding her mistress's face in the glass.

"What is the matter with you? Why are you staring at me like that?"

By an effort Babette recovered her usual subdued, respectful expression.

"I feared mademoiselle was not well," she murmured, apologetically.

"Nonsense! Go on with your brushing, and do not take notice of what does not concern you."

"She is a very cat!" Babette said, confidentially, to the brush, as

she picked it up. "I should like to know what wickedness she is planning now."

"Perhaps it is not to be wondered at, after all," Pauline mused. "He is so different from the men one usually meets—so honestly simple, so bright and true, so sensitively honorable. With most men I know the word 'honor' means paying their gambling-debts on settling-day, and the meaning of the words 'truth' and 'faith' is lost in the mists of 'long ago.' If I had led on any of my aristocratic admirers as I did him last week, they would have forsworn wife or sweetheart a dozen times over in my favor before now. But his honor is of a tougher quality. I believe he would marry that chit in spite of me if the release did not come from her. It shall! If I can not have him, she never shall! On that one point my mind is fully made up!"

"Mademoiselle will forgive me," interrupted Babette, deprecatingly, "but Monsieur le Duc was to be here by one. It is already that hour but a quarter."

"Of course; I had forgotten. Twist up my hair negligently. No stiffness, Babette! I hate my hair to look dressed so early. I will wear that Nile green robe; it makes me look pale and subdued, if anything can. Quick; there is his knock! Now to give him his *congé* gracefully. How surprised he will be at my refusal!"

Babette shook her fist at the graceful form as the door closed.

"For two hours I have stood here, brush, brush, brush, and she has never said, 'Rest a moment; you must be tired.' She does not think I am a woman at all; she looks upon me as a machine invented for her pleasure. Take care, my proud, selfish, beautiful madame, that the machine does not crush your pretty, soft body!"

* * * * *

Pauline had not much soul, and she did not really care much for music as music; but she liked the pleasant, soothing effect it had upon her. So she went to the opera two or three times a week, and in the intervals whispered scandal, ate ices, drank coffee, or dozed gracefully behind the curtains of her box. This evening Mrs. Setton and she were scarcely settled in their seats before Lord Summers begged admission.

The good-natured old gentleman looked rather worried, as he took the chair behind Pauline and exchanged civilities with both ladies. Discreet Mrs. Setton was always intensely interested in the music during the visits of Pauline's friends to her box, so her presence could hardly be called a hinderance to confidential intercourse between Pauline and her guardian.

"I have had a visit from Bennoir this afternoon, Pauline," his lordship began. "The poor boy is terribly upset by your refusal."

"He will get over it."

"No doubt he will by and by. But in the meantime he has sent me as his ambassador. He begs through me that you will try to reconsider your decision of this morning. He fancies that perhaps his rashness has ruined his chance, and thinks he might have had a better chance if he had waited longer. Is it so?"

Pauline smiled a slow, satisfied smile as she answered:

"On the contrary, I forced the matter on. I knew the poor boy meant to propose to me—he wearied me beyond description by

dogging my steps so persistently—so I allowed him the opportunity he sought, and dismissed him.”

“But, my dear girl, have you no heart at all? To my knowledge this is the seventh most satisfactory offer you have refused. I dare say you have had quite as many of which I have heard nothing. I begin to think you are heartless.”

“Perhaps you are right,” she said, indifferently. “But you must allow there are two sides to the question. On the one hand, you ask why I do not marry. I answer your question by asking, on the other, ‘Why should I marry?’ I do not love these men who propose to me. I am my own mistress; I have everything I wish for—or nearly so—and I am happy as I am. Now can you answer my question: ‘Why should I marry?’”

“Well, I could give you some reasons; but I’m afraid they would sound very worldly-minded to you. Do you know, people are beginning to make remarks about your repeated refusals. They say—”

“What do they say, my lord?” she asked, turning quickly on her chair and looking him straight in the face. “What evil do they dare say of me?”

She put the question abruptly, and in a manner that asserted her right to an instant answer; and her eyes flashed as she waited for him to speak.

Lord Summers looked at her in astonishment too great for words. Pauline, perceiving her mistake, quickly recovered herself.

“Won’t you tell me what these scandal-mongers say of me?” she asked, in her usual low tone, as she resumed her indolent attitude.

“What a revelation!” passed through his lordship’s mind as he answered. “You absolutely startled me. I never saw you so impetuous on any subject before. My dear, they say no evil of you. How could they?”

“True; how could they?” with a suppressed sigh of relief.

“What they insinuate is that you are waiting until you can choose your husband irrespective of any one’s permission; and I wanted to assure you that I should not withhold my consent if it were so. If you have really lost your heart to some one not quite in your own rank of life, do not fear that I shall interfere with your choice.”

“You must be very anxious indeed to get me married, since you make even that concession.” There was a touch of bitterness in her voice, and she kept her eyes fixed on the stage.

“My dear child, why will you misunderstand my motives!” He glanced at Mrs. Sefton’s absorbed profile, and went on in a still lower voice: “There is the estate, you know, to think of. The succession lies between you and your Cousin Ethel, the sweet faced child I pointed out to you the other day. If you die unmarried, the estate will revert to her children at your death. Of course there is nothing against that. But I am sensitive about the trust imposed on me by my old friend, Sir Paul. As I read it, his will lays the whole responsibility of this question of succession on my shoulders. In other words, he leaves me the power to pick and choose a fitting head for the House of Malling. Now, in the event of your

not marrying, the next heir will be the offspring of this Ethel and her artist-husband, Mr. Dornton."

Pauline had kept herself well under control since her outbreak; but she could not avoid an exclamation as Lord Summers put this point before her.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked, craning his neck to look over into the stalls.

"Nothing. I thought I saw some one who is, I believe, in Africa. Go on. I am listening."

"Let me see—where was I? Oh, I know! That Mr. Dornton, to whom you have been kind, is engaged to your cousin, you know. Well, he is a very nice young man—clever, well-looking, nice manners and all that; but I don't think Sir Paul would have chosen him as the perpetuator of the Malling family."

"Why not?" The question was put quickly—almost, it seemed, in spite of herself.

Lord Summers' face was all amazement as he digested the two words.

"Why not?" he repeated, slowly caressing his chin as he pondered his answer. "Well, it seems to me that the question answers itself. Who is he? What is he? Whence comes he? Who are his people? What were his father and grandfather—allow that he ever had a grandfather?"

Pauline moved impatiently.

"Of course he will make an excellent husband for poor little Ethel, for he is bound to come to the front."

"Do you know, whenever you talk of that child, I fancy you regard me as an interloper? I am sure your sympathies are with her."

"Not at all—not at all! You are too sensitive. I am glad to know that Geoffrey's child is not likely to suffer hardship. This Dornton seems a manly, honorable young fellow, and will take good care of that pretty little creature. I should not like to think that my old friend's daughter was fated to spend her life in copying from the old masters of the Kensington Museum, as she told me she does now."

It was well for his lordship's opinion of his ward's disposition that she was sitting with her face turned toward the stage during his kindly little speech. He was a shrewd old man, and, had he seen the hatred and malice in her eyes when he spoke of Ethel, his previous judgment of her character might have been considerably shaken.

* * * * *

The next day Miss Malling drove to the Kensington Museum, taking Babette with her. It was a students' day, and the visitors made the round of the galleries in quietness, Pauline stopping in apparent interest by the side of every lady student. At last she found what she sought.

She passed on until she reached a quiet corner, and then beckoned Babette to her side.

"You see that very young girl in the gray dress with the holland apron?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"That is the person whose address I want. Keep her in sight until she leaves—she is too much taken up with her work to notice you—follow her home, get the address, and then go to some of the shops close by and find out her name."

"Mademoiselle does not even know her name?"

"I know her real name, but not the one she is going by just now. Whatever you do, don't miss her, even if you have to take a cab to follow her."

Miss Malling returned to her carriage, feeling that she had accomplished a good afternoon's work.

"I may want to get at her yet," she thought, as she settled herself comfortably among the cushions of her carriage.

CHAPTER V.

"I'LL not give way! If I stay away one day, I shall want to do it again, and, then my copy will not be finished by the end of the month, and Mr. Borroughs will give me a character for want of punctuality."

Ethel uttered this aloud, though she was alone, evidently with the idea that merely hearing the words would, perhaps, strengthen her waning resolution.

Poor child! Her head ached, and her eyes looked quite pathetic with the heavy circles round them; but she refused to pity herself—in fact, she felt rather contemptuous toward her "miserable want of character," and resolutely plunged her head into a large basin of water, rubbed her hair half dry, and started for the museum.

Though her head still ached a good deal, the copy made fair progress, and there was no sign of neglect or hurry in the work, her throbbing temples notwithstanding.

She always wore a hat with a rather large brim, when copying, to save her eyes from the light from above, and at the same time shut out most of the room and its occupants from her view, so that her attention was not so liable to wander from her work.

She was engaged on a difficult patch of shadow and she sighed as she realized the difference between her shadow and that of the old master. At that moment her father echoed the sigh; and followed it up by:

"Too solid—altogether too solid, my child!"

She did not turn, being accustomed to these little visits from her father while at work in the gallery.

"I know it as well as you do, dad," she said, plaintively; "but how am I to alter it?"

"Suppose we leave the shadow for to-day, and go out into the sunshine for an hour or two?"

"Now, dad, don't tempt me to desert the post of duty. If you knew what a struggle I had with myself before I started this morning, how I longed to stay at home and 'coddle' instead of facing my work like a woman, you would not stand behind me, like a modern Mephistopheles, whispering wickedness into my ear."

The busy fingers went on while she spoke, and the heavy eyes

glanced backward and forward unceasingly from the original of her work.

"Leave the painting for a few moments, dear; I want to introduce you to Captain Pelling. My daughter!"

Ethel plucked off her unbecoming head-gear as she turned to face the unknown visitor. She was greatly surprised at the introduction, her father having kept her in strict seclusion since she left school, a year before; but she was too thoroughly a gentlewoman to show her surprise.

"I taught Captain Pelling the rudiments of sketching before he went on an expedition to Central Africa three or four years ago, and he is so delighted with his own efforts that he wanted to carry me right away to Wimbledon at once, to see and praise them. I told him I must come in and set your mind at rest first."

"That is scarcely a truthful statement, Miss Mallett," put in Captain Pelling, with a smile. "I don't want praise, but judgment. The expedition I went out with are going to publish the result of our investigations, and they want some of my sketches to illustrate the work. Of course I am highly flattered, but a little bit afraid that the sketches are not up to the standard. When I saw Mr. Mallett in Piccadilly, I thought, 'Here is the man who will tell me honestly if I dare to allow them to be published;' and I pounced upon him. And now I have obtained two judges in the place of one. My trap is waiting outside, and I trust you will let me take you both down to my little box. My housekeeper will find us something to eat, and in the cool of the evening, we can go quietly through my little pictures and arrange them together."

Ethel looked puzzled. Mr. Mallett—as he still chose to call himself—could hardly conceal the surprise he felt at the adroit manner in which his late pupil had managed to include "the child," as her father still called her, in the invitation; and, seeing that it was addressed to her personally, he held his tongue.

Ethel glanced at her rather worn but prettily made dove-colored gown and her bibbed holland apron.

"I am not in presentable order," she began.

"But you will see no one but the housekeeper and the present company. Show yourself superior to such considerations, Miss Mallett. It will be a positive favor to me, for they are hurrying the preparations forward, and I should not like to be the cause of delaying the publication of the book. At the same time, I dare not place my work before the public until it has been passed by a competent judge."

"Take, papa; he will do without me."

"No; I am greedy. I want you both."

Ethel looked at her father, and they both smiled.

"Very well; I will come. But papa will tell you I am of no use in a case of this sort."

Ethel leaned back in the well-cushioned phaeton, and listened lazily to the conversation between the two men, her father sharing the back seat with the groom.

Captain Pelling's horses traveled well, and, the breeze blowing right in her face, Ethel gradually lost the depressing pain in her head, and began to feel interested in the places they were passing.

Her new acquaintance guessed she was tired, although he did not know that she had been thinking instead of sleeping the greater part of the last night—and left the drive to work the cure. He talked on art subjects incessantly with her father, only stopping now and again to point out some unusually striking building to the silent little girl by his side.

Ethel felt supremely grateful for all this; and, when at last the horses stopped at a tiny cottage consisting to all appearances entirely of bay-windows and creeper-covered porch, and looking tinier still by comparison with the gigantic elm trees that surrounded it, she had a slight tinge of pink in her cheeks, and the dark rings had nearly disappeared from round her eyes.

A pleasant middle-aged woman came to the hall door, and Captain Pelling handed Ethel over to her at once.

"Give Miss Mallett a cup of especially good tea, Mrs. Crichton. Give her 'Punch' to look at, and make her lie down until a quarter of an hour before dinner. Above all, don't let her talk; she has had a bad headache"—Ethel looked at him in mute surprise—"and it will return if she exerts herself before she dines."

Mr. Mallett looked amused; but the captain, supremely unconscious of having said or done anything unusual, led the way through the long low hall and out at a glass door at the end.

"This way, miss;" and Mrs. Crichton opened the door, through which she was followed by Ethel.

It was the loveliest room the young girl had ever seen. The walls were a subdued stone green, the curtains and general decorations were of the same color, artistically touched up here and there with gold. There were also very thin delicate lace-curtains at the large bay-windows, of which there were two. There was a soft old-looking Persian rug that covered the whole floor, except a few inches by the walls. The floor of the windows were bare, save for some exquisite specimens of skins of which Ethel did not even know the names. Each of these windows was tastefully and luxuriously furnished. There were two—and two only—very fine paintings on the walls, and the whole room was littered most picturesquely with valuable curiosities brought home by Captain Pelling. The breeze just fluttered the lace curtains, and the lawn and shrubs outside seemed to harmonize with the quiet restfulness of the room.

Ethel looked round her with a sense of supreme delight. Mrs. Crichton mistook the look, and apologized for the general untidiness of the room.

"You see, miss, Captain Pelling took the house only three weeks ago. He has not been in England a month yet, and he is unpacking fresh cases every day. He won't allow Martha or me to touch his wonderful curiosities, so I am obliged to put up with this dreadful state of things. You will find this large couch more comfortable for a real rest than either of those small ones. If you will allow me, I will throw this light woolen shawl over your feet. Let me raise your pillow the least bit. There"—after carefully arranging it—"that is more comfortable. I will bring this week's 'Punch' and the tea in a few minutes."

How good the tea was, and how enjoyable the great quietness and peace seemed to Ethel after the distracting roar and rattle of the

London streets! Her eyes wandered from one pretty article to another in this charming room that was nearly all window, and yet was not too light by reason of the well-arranged curtains and blinds. Her father and Captain Pelling came in sight presently, and paced up and down in the shadow of two large trees that stood at the far end of the lawn. She watched them with half-closed eyes, and wondered lazily what they were discussing with such evident interest. Their voices came to her in a soothing drowsy hum. She wished very much that Jack was out there with them—unkind, thoughtless Jack, who had not written to her for a whole week. In spite of her present content, she fell asleep with big tears trembling on her lashes.

Captain Pelling came through the window by-and-by to look for some cigarettes, and was surprised to see Ethel lying there. He had expected Mrs. Crichton would take her to her own sanctum.

He stood irresolute for a moment just inside the window, and then crossed the room to look more closely at his pretty young guest.

"She's as pretty as a picture, and as good as gold, if I know anything about physiognomy. She has a trouble of some sort, poor little child! I should like to kiss those tears away. I wonder what she's worrying about. Perhaps Mallett is hard up; he seems a careless sort of a fellow. I'll see if I can't help them a bit in that direction, any way."

He found his cigarettes, and went back to his elder guest: but he was not so interested as he had been in Mr. Mallett's conversation, and was manifestly delighted to receive the summons to dinner.

This was a genuine red-letter day for Ethel. She was so intensely interested in the captain's description of his travels that for the time she was drawn out of herself and her own affairs.

Mr. Mallett too was heartily pleased. This was precisely the kind of hospitality he liked. He was not compelled to speak a word more than he wished, and he sat listening to Pelling's graphic accounts with a choice cigar between his lips enjoying the exquisite *dolce far niente* of a man who had dined well and was not expected to repay his host by a succession of verbal fire-works.

And Pelling was equally satisfied with his guests. When the evening was over, he was surprised to find how well he had talked, and he felt convinced that successful conversation as often depends on the quality of the listener as of the talker. He was rather ashamed, though, and not a little surprised, to find how much he had talked about himself.

"It's a thing I was never given to; but, by Jove, she led me on! When I looked into her sweet gray eyes sparkling with interest, I seemed to live that business with the Kaffers all over again, and forgot I had anything to do with it personally. I hope they won't think me an unmitigated cad, for they're respectable people, in spite of their present circumstances, I'm certain."

There was not much progress made in the ostensible purpose of the visit, seeing that the "little sketches"—which turned out to be rather good specimens of their class—led the way to so much description that they had looked only at some half dozen before they

came to one that created a diversion which lasted until they started for home.

The captain had been holding forth on the pluck and fidelity of a native servant, at whose portrait they were looking, when Ethel said:

"I wonder you did not persuade him to come to England with you. Your relatives would have worshiped him in their gratitude for having saved your life so often."

"I have not one relative in the world, Miss Mallett," answered the captain gravely.

Ethel's glance was full of sympathy.

"I beg your pardon," she put in hastily; "I am sorry I made the remark."

"Don't be sorry. I'm very glad. I often long to talk a little about myself. You can't believe what an awful feeling it is to know that there is not one person in the world who is sufficiently interested in you to care for your private concerns."

"Decidedly unpleasant," murmured Mr. Mallett, between the puffs of his cigar.

"You'll hardly believe, Mallett, that this is the most domesticated evening I've spent for the last six years. Jolly hard, when you consider that I am naturally fond of home and all that kind of thing! I was just getting weary of the loneliness of this place; but your being here to-night has changed the whole aspect of affairs. It looks so homelike to see you sitting there as if you belonged to the place, Miss Mallett. To-morrow night I shall fancy I see you still there, and be reconciled for a time at least."

"You should marry—best recipe in the world for loneliness!" Mr. Mallett observed laughingly.

"Tried it, and found it a failure."

"Eh!" Mr. Mallett sat upright and stared into his host's face; then he sunk back into his former position, saying, "I beg your pardon, Pelling, if I have said anything unpleasant."

"Not at all—in fact, if I shouldn't bore you so horribly as to prevent your ever taking compassion on me again, I should like to tell you about my marriage. Sometimes I think it must all have been a dream, it seems so unreal from the fact that I never by any chance speak of it. You see, it is scarcely a subject one would discuss at one's club."

He sat for a moment gazing absently into the garden, which was beginning to look dim and shadowy in the summer twilight, as if he were calling up the past from its gloomy depths. Among the larger shrubs there were already heavy patches of mysterious shade, and the young moon, in a steel-blue sky, was just rising. The whole outlook was impressive in its perfect stillness, and the captain's manners seemed in harmony with the surroundings. Ethel felt a shiver of superstitious awe pass over her, and the movement seemed to bring back the captain from the momentary reverie into which he had fallen.

"You are cold, Miss Mallett? Shall I shut the window?"

"No, thanks; I enjoy the fresh cool air."

He crossed the room and fetched a light woolen wrap.

"Put this round you then. You must indeed; I can not allow you to catch cold on your first visit to me."

There was a slight pause after he had sat down, and again Ethel felt the curious little shiver run over her.

"You don't know what a strange place this world is, Miss Mallett," he began. "Your father loves you, and takes every care of you. If any man were to offer you the least rudeness, he would immediately resent it; he shields you from all harmful influence and knowledge; and you have grown up like a little daisy, modest in yourself and ignorant of the flaunting splendor and wickedness around you. You must therefore bear this in mind, and not be hard on the failings of others who have not had your privileges. My wife—poor girl!—had no mother when I first met her, and was totally dependent on her father for society. It was a bad training for a young woman, for her father was a good-natured careless fellow, always avoiding responsibility as long as was possible, and, when at last compelled to show authority, making up by exaggerated harshness for his previous neglect.

"My wife was a high-spirited girl, and could not submit to his alternate fits of indulgence and tyranny. She was about seventeen when I first met her, and her father's treatment was becoming unbearable. She used to pour her tales of woe into my sympathetic ear, until I became desperately sorry for her, and suggested the only means in my power to help her, which was to make her my wife. It was a foolish proceeding, I know; but I was young then, and had not begun to look at life seriously, or I should have asked myself how her position would be bettered by being tied for life to a helpless, penniless fellow, as I was then. Well, we were married—privately, of course—and for a few weeks thought we loved each other very dearly; then she had another fearful quarrel with her father, and begged me to take her away to a home of her own. I was earning a beggarly pittance at that time by sending home weekly articles on 'English Life in Rome' and so forth to some of the London papers. I explained my position to her, and advised her to wait until I had obtained a certain appointment, of which I was almost sure. She lost her temper—poor child, it was natural enough in the circumstances—and vowed she'd never come near me again. The very next day I was telegraphed for to England. I wrote to her, asking her to be patient for awhile, telling her that I would work hard and get a permanent post now that there was a necessity to work, and promising to come back shortly to take her from the cruelty to which she had to submit.

"On my arrival in England, I found that an almost unknown uncle had left me a property amounting to nearly three thousand pounds a year. You can imagine how glad I was for my poor girl's sake. I made up my mind to surprise her and personally communicate the good news, so did not write. How I have always regretted that decision! I got through the usual legal formalities as quickly as possible, and rushed back to Rome—only to find them gone! Some told me they had gone to one place, some to another, until I was utterly at a loss what to do. However, I traced them, after a month's search, to Naples; and then it was only to find that her

father had died a few days previously, and that she had disappeared no one knew whither.

"You can imagine my misery! There was I in possession of an income sufficient to make us both so happy and contented, while she was probably slaving to keep herself, if not in absolute want. I did not know any of her people, so I was compelled to search single-handed. For six months I went up and down like a restless spirit in search of peace. At last I found her—or rather her grave—for she was dead; she had died in a convent, where she had been teaching English. By the help of a lay sister I obtained permission to see her grave. There was a plain stone with her name only, and the date of her death, which took place some few weeks prior to my visit. Poor child! I can not convey to you how great a blow it was to me, and my grief was not lessened by the fact that she had died at enmity with me."

"We must hope she forgave you, although you did not see her," Ethel said, quietly.

Pelling did not answer, and there was silence for a time. It was a relief when Mr. Mallett spoke.

"She must have been of a most unforgiving disposition to resent your poverty so bitterly, and to nurse her hatred to her dying moments."

"I don't think she did that—indeed, the chances are that, in her poor little way, she was looking for me as anxiously as I was for her. It was one of those strange fatalities that human foresight seems utterly unable to prevent."

He rose and shook himself, as if wishful to put away the memories that had crowded upon him while speaking of the long-silent past.

"You will think me no end of a bore for annoying you with all this history; but, if you can imagine the relief it has been to me to speak of it, and you have any kindness in your hearts, you will forgive me for the infliction. Now we will have the lamps and *revenir à nos moutons* in the shape of sketches."

"Not to-night, I think; it is already past ten. We have to get back to town, and I have a long day's work before me to-morrow."

"But my poor sketches? I have it! You must come down and spend a long day with me on Sunday—that can't interfere with your work. What do you say, Miss Mallett?"

Ethel looked perplexed. She had hoped against hope that Jack would return every Sunday since his departure, and went through a torment of expectation as the day wore on. This had taken place for the last three Sundays; but she still went on hoping.

Her father, recognizing the difficulty in which Ethel found herself, came to the rescue.

"Ethel is thinking that Sunday may not be her own to give."

"You have friends coming? Will you think me unpardonably intrusive if I ask you to bring them too? I have no friends of my own to ask, except the fellows I have been in Africa with, and I am honestly tired of their society for the present. I know I am not conforming to ceremony in making this request; but you must accept me as half a barbarian since my long stay in the wilds of Africa."

"If Ethel can arrange matters, it shall be as you wish. I can't say more; for it is not my affair, but hers."

"Thank you very much." Then, turning to the old house-keeper, he said: "The lamps, if you please, Mrs. Crichton; also some brandy and soda, and a little port-wine negus for Miss Mallett. Tell Jim to put Marjorie to the dog-cart, and get ready to drive Mr. and Miss Mallett back to town. Mind, Mrs. Crichton, bring that dark-blue scarf thing with the hair fringe down from my room to wrap Miss Mallett in; it will be cold driving."

Ten minutes later the captain stood alone at the gate, watching the dog-cart disappear down the road. He lighted a cigar—his first that evening—very methodically, puffed at it thoughtfully, and said to himself:

"So it's Ethel's 'affair.' Well, I hope they'll come and bring Ethel's 'affair' with them. I shall be better able to judge of my own chance after I have seen my rival."

CHAPTER VI.

It was a day or two after Ethel's visit to Wimbledon that she sat reading a curious letter with which was inclosed a sheet of paper bearing only these words, "My darling Ethel," at the top. The letter accompanying the blank sheet read as follows:

"Your lover cares for you no longer. His honor and his pity for you alone keep him to his given word. He makes light of you to others. Take the remedy into your own hands. He consented to leave the letter he commenced writing to you, which is inclosed, and even laughingly gave it to another woman."

Ethel did not quite believe all this; but she believed enough of it was true to justify her in giving Jack an opportunity of freeing himself from his engagement. She decided that she would not worry her father, but would act for herself. Acting on this decision, she wrote:

"MY DEAR JACK,—You have now been away the three weeks which you decided, before starting, was to be the outside limit of your stay. As yet you do not say anything about returning, but, on the contrary, speak of your work as being likely to keep you for several weeks longer. In the three weeks of your absence you have written me four letters, and those have evidently been an unwelcome task. Do you guess what I am going to say? I wish I were sure you knew, that I might be saved the pain of writing the words. I think you have found out that you do not care for me in the way you thought you did, and your sense of honor alone is keeping you to the letter of your engagement to me. I have reasons of which you know nothing for believing this to be the case; so I am writing now to say that perhaps we have both made a mistake, and that, if you are willing, our engagement had better come to an end.

"Please don't think I blame you in any way; it was only one of those mistakes that everybody is liable to make.

"Ever your sincere friend,

"ETHEL MALLETT."

Poor Ethel! How she cried over that letter! How she hoped against hope that Jack might not be willing to end the engagement! How carefully she read the words through to be sure that she had not definitely settled the matter—that in fact, she had done only what she intended—given Jack a chance of accepting his freedom if he wished for it!

Had the matter-of-fact little epistle arrived at a more favorable moment, had Jack had leisure to read between the lines and discover the wounded pride and self-respect that had dictated every word, his manhood might have asserted itself in Ethel's favor. As it was, Jack read the letter impatiently at first; but, as its meaning dawned upon him, he turned back to the top of the leaf and read it again, assured himself of the unequivocal nature of the offer of freedom, thrust it into his pocket, and went off whistling energetically to meet Miss Malling at the station on her return from town.

Pauline saw at a glance that something had happened, and, knowing what she knew, guessed shrewdly what that something was. She had not been five minutes in Jack's society before she felt a subtle difference in his manner toward her.

There was a something—she could not tell what—in all he said and did that conveyed the impression of his intention to do and dare all that was possible to win her. There was a bolder glance from his eyes, a more determined pressure of the hand, as he helped her from the carriage, than he had ever ventured on before, and she felt instinctively that, unless she meant to marry this young man, she had better seek safety at once in absence.

And yet the masterful manner rather strengthened than lessened her feeling for him. She had for the last six years been so accustomed to be humbly worshiped and adored that there was a delightful sense of freshness in Jack's "stand and deliver" style of proceeding.

"I am so glad to find you still here, Mr. Dornton!" she said, at luncheon, glancing at him bewitchingly between the leaves of a palm-plant. "We were so afraid that you would not have been able to endure a fortnight of this terribly dull place, and that we should find you gone. Weren't we, Mrs. Seton?"

"You forget that Mr. Dornton has had a real occupation to make the dullness endurable. His life is not passed in killing time, as yours is, dear."

"To be sure! I had forgotten to ask how the pictures have progressed?"

"The view of the house from the wood is finished as far as I can finish it here. The rest of the work I must do in Newman Street."

"That is where your studio is, is it not? I should so like to see some of your completed pictures. Will you ask us up some day to look at them?"

"Any day you please. Say the day after to-morrow?"

"No, no; I can not go back to dusty London again so soon. I expect my first batch of visitors on that day, too. At last I shall be able to do something in the way of entertaining you, Mr. Dornton, and show my gratitude to you for enlivening our solitude in the past."

"You are too kind. But I have made arrangements for returning to town to-morrow."

"Nonsense. You speak of arrangements in such a serious way that one might imagine you had a wife and children who would be fancying you were killed on the railway if you did not appear at the expected moment; instead of which you are that enviable creature—a man without a tie."

The words were said carelessly and lightly enough, yet Pauline's heart throbbed from fear that he might contradict the assertion. She paused an instant, dreading his reply. He made none; but a dull red crept slowly up his face to the roots of his hair. She read this sign to suit herself, and went on:

"That being the case, as you have no one to claim your presence as a right, why not favor me with it as a pleasure? I should advise you to stay, Mr. Dornton. There are some really charming people coming on Thursday whom you should know."

"I shall be only too glad to stay; but I should not like you to think I stayed to make fresh acquaintances. If I stay, it will be because you ask me, and because it will be such a real pleasure to me."

"Now that is very nicely put; and the affair is settled. Will you show me what work you have done in my absence?"

"If you two are going to talk 'art,' I shall retire and help Babette."

Mrs. Sefton was the embodiment of discretion, a very model for lady-companions. She walked away cheerfully, and Jack followed Miss Malling to the picture-gallery.

They were standing in front of the easel on which Jack had placed his painting of Mallingford House. It was a charming picture. The glaring brilliancy of the original was toned down by the intervening branches and foliage of the foreground.

"You must do me a copy of this, Mr. Dornton," said Pauline, "as a memento of that first morning when I found you asleep in the wood."

"And awakened me!"

The words were simple enough, but Jack threw a great deal of expression into them, and his eyes conveyed a world of meaning.

Miss Malling flashed a glance at him as she asked:

"Did I wake you? It was quite unintentional on my part."

"And involuntary on mine."

Pauline, fearing that the conversation was getting beyond her control, turned quickly and caught up the first picture that came to her hand from the open portfolio.

As was to be expected, Jack had spent many of his spare hours during the last lonely fortnight in painting her portrait from memory; and it was this that she caught up in her nervous haste.

"Oh, Mr. Dornton!" she exclaimed, in rapturous tones. Even her vanity was satisfied, and she blushed genuinely at the lovely picture Jack had made of her.

"I am sorry you found that. You will perhaps think it gross presumption; if so, I can destroy it. I can't wish it undone, for it has given me so many pleasant hours."

"Presumption? No, indeed! I feel astonished at the truthfulness

and the flattery you have managed to combine in the picture. Of course I have often been told I am a good-looking woman; but I don't think I am anything like that."

"Then I may keep it?"

"Yes; if you will keep it only in your studio. You will not exhibit it?"

"Can you think it?"

"I can not understand how you could paint a picture like that from memory."

"Then you can not understand what memory is."

After that there was an awkward pause. Pauline half wished to hear Jack say that he loved her, and yet she half dreaded it, for she had not yet made up her mind as to how she would answer him. She was quite sure she loved him; but then in her history there were certain facts that compelled her to follow the counsels of prudence rather than inclination. She was rather afraid just now that inclination might become too strong for her if she gave it full rein much longer. But she was like a child playing with fire; for, though she knew the danger attending such a pastime, she could not bring herself to give it up. She flattered herself that Jack would not dare to declare his love without more open encouragement than she had yet given him, and, woman-like, she hovered about the dangerous edge, neither advancing, nor receding, and almost wishing fate would take the matter out of her hands. Her wish was fulfilled sooner than she anticipated.

Jack showed her his sketches one after another, and they were discussed, criticised, and replaced.

As he put the last one back into the portfolio, he turned and addressed her abruptly. With such impetuous force did his words flow that she was compelled to listen to the end.

"With regard to my staying here, Miss Mallings, I did not care to discuss the matter further before Mrs. Sefton at luncheon; but I must do so now."

He drew a deep breath, and clinched his hand firmly on the back of a chair. The beginning sounded so very business-like that Pauline suspected nothing near the truth of what was coming, and turned to him in quiet surprise. He did not, however, give her time to speak.

"I can not—I dare not stay here without telling you the truth; for, if I allow my feelings to become any stronger than they are, and meet disappointment in the end, I'm afraid I shall not be responsible for my actions. Miss Mallings, I love you—madly, passionately; I love you! While I am telling you this, I know the chances are that you will presently turn your back and say, as you leave me, 'Please quit my house at once;' yet I now tell you, because I can not stay in your presence with safety another hour unless you give me some hope. I have loved you from the moment I woke and saw you that morning in the wood. You will say that is not very long; to me it is a life-time. I never lived until that moment. I shall never live again if you send me away. If you do not crush me with the weight of your scorn, if you will give me one little word of comfort, of the faintest hope, I will make for myself a name of which you will be proud. Don't think me boastful, for I feel that

your love will endow me with such strength of purpose, such force of will, that all obstacles must give way before them."

His face was very pale when he ceased speaking. Pauline stood near him, the color coming and going in her cheeks, her eyes fixed on his face; but she said never a word. When he spoke again, his words came slowly, hesitatingly, and his voice had a stifled sound, as it choked with despair.

"You have no answer for me; but you do not tell me to leave you! It can not be that, Pauline; heart of my heart, queen of my soul, you love me!"

His last words died away to a whisper of intense rapture; and, as Pauline felt his arms encircle her, his kisses on her lips, she forgot all the shadows that lurked in the past, forgot all the questionable means she had employed to attain this end. She only knew that she loved him with all the force of her passionate nature, that she was loved in return; and for the moment there was in her heart as supreme a joy as was ever felt by woman.

CHAPTER VII.

FOR some reason Pauline Malling was in a very irritable state of mind. Perhaps she was regretting the moment's impulse that had prompted her to accept a nameless young painter, after refusing offers by the dozen. From whatever cause it arose, Miss Malling's temper was certainly very much ruffled this afternoon. She sat in a low chair in her dressing-room, an hour before dinner, looking the personification of angry beauty, her brows drawn together in a line, and her lips cruelly set, reminding one strangely of the tigers' heads on the hall chair-backs, though where the likeness lay it would have been hard to determine. Babette, too, seemingly had a weight on her mind. She crept about her work, laying out Miss Malling's elegant evening toilet with a subdued air very different from her usual noiseless activity. Babette was doing her best to get through her duties, when, as ill luck would have it, memory for a moment asserted itself, and brought before her a picture of a pretty black-eyed little urchin tossing from side to side in his small cot and crying out her name unceasingly as he refused the cooling drink offered by a hand he did not love.

The maid sobbed—sobbed audibly.

Miss Malling raised her eyes from their contemplation of the carpet, and looked in dignified surprise at the young Frenchwoman. Noting for the first time the signs of tears on her face, Miss Malling felt angry. Was it not enough that she was worried? How dared this creature add to her disquiet by coming there and crying—absolutely crying over her work?

"What in Heaven's name is the matter with you, Babette? Pray don't let me have any weeping and wailing. If there is one thing that exasperates me more than another, it is a crying woman."

"Pardon, mademoiselle; the grief overcame me *malgré moi*. I would not for a moment worry you with my trouble. I did not intend to speak myself; but, as you have noticed my sorrow, I will make bold to tell you that I have a little step-brother, the only being

in the world who is related to me, and I have here a letter telling me he is very ill, and that he asks for me night and day—night and day.” The poor girl’s voice broke for a moment; but she rallied and went on. “If mademoiselle could spare me for just enough time to get to Boulogne and back to see the *pauvre petit*!”

“And what am I to do in the meantime?” Pauline asked icily. “Of course you can go, if you like; but you need not come back. And do not trouble to apply to me for a character; for I shall certainly refuse to give you one if you insist upon leaving me in this sudden manner. I am surprised you should ask me such an insane thing, when you know the house will be full of people the day after to-morrow. I could not possibly do without you. Pray, do not say another word about it, and please leave off crying.”

Babette moved away to the far end of the room, wiped her eyes, and stood for an instant quite still, repressing the sobs that shook her frame.

“If my little Pierre dies without seeing me I will never forgive you—never! I will watch for a chance of doing you a great harm; and it will come if I am patient,” the girl thought.

Had Pauline heard the muttered words, she would not have felt so complacent at getting over the difficulty of doing without her maid.

After dressing Miss Malling and making the dressing-room tidy, Babette passed through the picture-gallery on her way to Mrs. Perkins’ sanctum for her usual cup of tea. Thinking everybody must be down-stairs, she stopped at Jack’s easel and looked at Pauline’s picture.

“So you think all the world is made for your pleasure? You are too high a lady to trouble yourself with your servants’ affairs; but perhaps they will trouble themselves with yours, madame! I have seen you flinch and shrivel up strangely sometimes. People don’t shrivel up for nothing, unless they have a fear of something; and if they have a secret fear, there must be something bad to cause it. If my little darling dies without the comfort of kissing his Babette once, it will be your fault; and all my life long I will watch, watch, watch, to try to repay your cruelty to me and him!”—and she looked as if she meant it.

Jack, who had stopped until the last moment finishing his rather difficult letter to Ethel in his own room, was struck by the intense hatred in the woman’s face as he opened his door, wondered for the moment what could have caused it, wished the next that he could call it up at will and use her as a model for a fiend, and the next moment forgot all about it—for the last bell began to sound, and he hastened down-stairs. Throwing his letter on the hall table, he hurried into the drawing-room to make his peace for being late.

Babette had her quiet cup of tea with Mrs. Perkins, and, with a plentiful shedding of tears, wrote to the woman who had charge of little Pierre, to say that she could not come to her darling just now.

The letter was full of loving messages and promises, and the poor girl’s heart felt very heavy as she put it into the bag. She had taken it into the hall herself, knowing that everybody was safe for the next hour in the dining-room. There was another letter lying there ready stamped for post; she took it up carelessly, recognized

it by the red seal as the one Jack had had in his hand when he passed her in the gallery, and stood transfixed with surprise as she read the address.

"The address of that pretty demoiselle that I followed home from the Museum, by her orders! Why, there is something in this! Why, if she wants the address of a lady who is known to Monsieur Dorn-ton, does she not ask him, instead of setting me to follow her like a policeman? I shall have that to find out!"

"Babette, I want you," Mrs. Perkins called from the door that shut off the servants' quarters.

Something in the voice, some subtle touch of sympathy, struck Babette's quick ear. She turned so sharply that Mrs. Perkins had not time to conceal the black-bordered letter she held in her hand.

With a heart-rending cry, Babette started forward and snatched the letter from her.

She was a quick, impetuous, unreasoning and unreasonable creature; she did not stop to consider that she could not have reached the child even if Pauline had given her instant consent. She remembered only that her mistress had been cruel to her in the time of her trouble; and she registered a vow that, if there was any shameful secret in Pauline Mallings's past life, she would hunt it out and humiliate her.

* * * * *

Mrs. Sefton, nodding over her work in the drawing-room, wondered what Pauline was talking about for so long a time with Mr. Dorn-ton in the garden. She began dimly to understand that Miss Mallings was going further than usual with the young man, and wondered whether her beautiful friend was going to throw herself away upon this penniless nobody.

And Jack and Pauline, forgetful for the time being of everything and everybody in the universe but themselves, paced slowly up and down the terrace, stopping occasionally to lean for a few minutes on the stone balustrade. Yet, even on that, the first day of his happiness, Jack felt dissatisfied; he had an inward consciousness that something was wanting in himself.

Though his love for this glorious woman was more absorbing, more intense, than his feeling for Ethel had been, his better nature had forced him to acknowledge that this was altogether a lower type of the divine passion, that respect and reverence were entirely absent from it, and that the increase of his love did not compensate for its lack of ideality; nevertheless, his love making was very satisfactory.

"You are sure that you have not deceived yourself—that you really love me enough to make this sacrifice for me without regretting it in the time to come?" he asked, softly, knowing beforehand what the answer would be.

She put her head against his arm, as she answered:

"Why do you talk of sacrifices? I am making none. Can you not understand that, when a woman loves with all her soul, as I love you, nothing that she does for the man of her choice can be looked upon as a sacrifice? If she loses everything, yet keeps his love, is not her loss rather her gain?"

"My noble, generous darling!"

"Not at all. If anything, I am more selfish than generous in this

matter. All I did was to accept you when you asked me to be your wife, and so make myself the happiest of women. Oh, Jack, you can't understand what my misery would have been if I had not had the opportunity given me."

Jack pressed her still closer to him, and was silent awhile. His next remark rather startled his love.

"I must go up to town to-morrow and see Lord Summers, and tell him of the honor you have done me."

"Why must you?"

"Because it is the only straightforward thing to do; he is your guardian."

"At present—yes, to a certain extent. But this is the end of July, and on the seventeenth of September he will no longer have a shadow of authority over me. Why not wait until then to announce our engagement, and so prevent the possibility of unpleasantness from any one?"

"You think, then, he would object?"

Pauline flushed uncomfortably as she remembered her guardian's remarks on this subject.

"I don't know; he might. You see, my uncle, Sir Paul, had such a very exaggerated notion of the importance of our family, and the first object of his will was to prevent my committing the mistake of marrying for love. If I acted up to his wishes, I should either marry for the good of the family name or not at all. Don't let us talk about that part of the business. I shall be my own mistress in September, so your love and patience will not be put to a very severe ordeal. Let it be as I wish. We can keep our love for each other to ourselves until then. Afterward—"

The pause was eloquent.

"Afterward?" Jack repeated, bending toward her. "How soon afterward?"

"That shall rest with you."

"You really mean that?"

"Yes."

"Then I should say the last day of September."

"So soon!" She caught her breath quickly.

Jack, leaning close to her face, heard the gasp, but could not judge if it was caused by joy, fear, or merely surprise.

"My darling, I will not force your inclination; you shall name your own time."

"No; it may just as well be soon as late. At any rate, there can be no drawing back then, and I shall be at peace."

Jack felt somewhat puzzled.

"You do not think I shall want to draw back?"

"No—oh, no!"

"Do you think it probable that you might want to draw back if you were given more time? Because, if so—"

"No—a thousand times no! Don't speak in that distressed way, Jack; you hurt me. I don't know why I said that. I know only one thing, that I love you beyond all else in the world, that I can not live without you; and I will not risk having you harassed or annoyed by lying gossip. People will say you are marrying me for my fortune, if they have time to recover from their surprise; and

that is why I should like our engagement not to be published until within a week or two of the wedding-day."

"And what is your opinion, Pauline?"

"On what?"

"As to my motives for asking you to marry me."

"I believe that you love me, and that you would marry me to-morrow if I came to you and said, 'I am not Pauline Malling at all. I am an impostor. I own nothing in the world but the clothes I stand up in.'"

She had freed herself from Jack's arm, and stood before him with her hands on his shoulders, trying to read his face by the dim light of the stars. Jack took the beautiful face between his hands and kissed it passionately.

"My darling, I only wish you were poor that I might prove how much I love you!"

She resigned herself to his embrace, and sighed wearily as she laid her head on his shoulder.

Jack cogitated on the change in his *fiancée*, as he smoked his cigar in his room that night.

"What a wonderful thing a woman's love is!" he murmured, complacently. "This grand, imperious creature, who has treated the noblest and wealthiest of the land as playthings, no sooner meets a man she loves than all the womanly traits of her character come out, and she is subdued, gentle, and trusting as the humblest of her sex—almost as gentle as"—he was almost saying, "my little Ethel." He pulled himself up impatiently, and a little pang of regret seized him as he recalled the fact that she was no longer his. "There is one thing I don't like, and that is this secrecy. It looks as if I were stealing my beautiful queen from her people. I would far rather go straight to Lord Summers for his approval. Of course it would be only a form, as Pauline is so nearly twenty-five; but it is a form I would rather observe than omit."

He shrugged his shoulders as he threw the end of his cigar through the window and prepared to retire for the night, reviling himself as a "splitter of straws, a searching for flaws, without any cause."

CHAPTER VIII

A LETTER lay by Ethel's plate; but she did not touch it. Mr. Mallett, self-absorbed as ever, did not notice how his daughter was struggling to preserve her usual composure all through the breakfast-time.

"Then you will send word to Captain Pelling about to-morrow. I should like to go very much; but I will not interfere with you in any way, my child; so decide as will please yourself."

Ethel went down-stairs with him, kissed him at the door, bade him not to be later than one o'clock, as it was Saturday, and she expected her usual weekly half holiday, and then returned upstairs to her letter.

Her pretty face was ghastly pale, and her hand shook a little as

she picked it up; but her mouth was firmly set, and there was no trace of tears as she broke the seal.

It was a very short letter, and, however much she might have felt inclined to cry beforehand, its business-like, matter-of-fact tone roused all her woman's pride, and her indignation choked her grief before she had finished reading it.

Jack Dornton had not intended to be cruel when he wrote it; but, after destroying a dozen sheets of paper in his desire to be neither too soft nor too hard, he decided at last that the shorter and plainer he made it the better; and this was what he had written:

"MY DEAR ETHEL,—I should not have had the courage to do as you have done; but perhaps you are right—as indeed you always are. For the future will you allow me to consider myself

"Your faithful friend,

"JOHN DORNTON?"

"I am glad—so very glad I wrote it. It would have been dreadful if we had married, and Jack had found out that he did not care for me afterward. Now I had better destroy that anonymous letter. I thought that perhaps Jack might have wished the engagement to continue, in which case I should have sent the letter to him and asked for an explanation."

So Ethel went bravely about her home duties, though her very lips were white with the restraint she was putting on her feelings. She tried with all the strength of mind she possessed to put her humiliating grief away from her.

"Why should I sorrow for him if he can throw me off without one word of regret?" she asked herself, angrily.

Still, in spite of her determination to crush her love under the weight of her self-respect, she now and again felt as if her heart would break. She resolutely denied herself the relief of tears, and suffered far more intensely in consequence.

The thrushes and the lively robins and perky sparrows were having a good time of it on the lawns at the Wigwam that morning—for there had been a shower during the night, and food was plentiful. Capt. Pelling was fond of these small birds, and liked to see them about the place, and he had determined to do what he could to tame them during the hard winter weather, should he decide to stay on in the Wigwam, which he had taken furnished for six months, with the option of renewing his tenancy for a similar term. He did not take much notice of the little creatures this morning, though. He was in a "brown study," and sat so motionless on his comfortable cane chair under the veranda that the more courageous of the birds hopped about within a yard of his feet.

The fact was Capt. Pelling was disappointed. He had expected a letter either from Ethel or Mr. Mallet that morning, to settle about their visit on the morrow.

"Even if they do not care to come," he told himself, "they might have been civil enough to send some conventional excuse."

He was greatly annoyed with Mrs. Crichton at breakfast because she would stand talking about orders for the morrow. At last he

told her irritably that the housekeeping was her department, and for Heaven's sake not to worry him about such trifles. He did not know whether he would be alone or whether he would have company. In any case she had better provide plenty; then they would be on the safe side.

Mrs. Crichton apologized and courtesied, and was leaving the room, when he repented of his anger, remembering that she had nothing to do with his present annoyance, that she was only doing her duty, and, being a dependent, was hardly a fair butt for his anger; he at once begged her pardon for his ebullition of temper, doing it too so heartily and sincerely that the old lady was more than ever delighted with her temporary master—he having taken her with the house from its owner—and she told Martha, in the privacy of the kitchen, that “he could not have done it handsomer if she'd been a duchess instead of his working housekeeper.”

After awhile it occurred to him that perhaps the Mallets had written, and that the letter had miscarried—and he felt somewhat relieved at the bare idea. Then he wondered if it would not look too patronizing on his part if he were to call and inquire about their decision. One moment he decided one way, and the next the other, until he had worried himself back into his former state of ill temper.

At last he made up his mind that he would go up to town in any case; and as he went along he would decide upon what course he would pursue. And all through his vacillation he never once admitted to himself that it was his longing to see Ethel again that had for the moment transformed him into a human shuttlecock.

He shouted to Jim, frightening the birds by the suddenness of the demonstration; and, when the groom appeared round the corner of the house, he ordered the phaeton to be got ready in twenty minutes, adding, “And see that it is ready to the minute, Jim.”

Capt. Pelling retired in-doors, and Jim went off, grumbling at the “inconsiderateness” of masters in general, and this one in particular, “expecting a chap to turn out a carriage and pair properly in that time!”

But, notwithstanding the short notice, the phaeton was ready a minute before the appointed time, looking as perfect in every detail as if Jim had known overnight that it would be wanted. Pelling had the reins in his hand and his foot on the step, when he noticed a telegraph-boy coming toward the house. He waited a moment. Yes, it was for him!

“From Geoffrey Mallett, Buckingham Street, Bloomsbury, to Captain Pelling, The Wigwam, Wimbledon. Shall be with you at two o'clock to-morrow. Get the sketches in inspection order.”

And the man of thirty felt a lad again in his light-heartedness, as he sent his handsome bays along the road. But he did not mean to be done out of his intended visit.

“She can't be greatly annoyed if I just stay a moment,” he told himself; “and I am not going to disappoint myself after having made up my mind.”

Ethel had bustled so energetically through her work, in her

anxiety to keep her mind away from her grief, that she found herself with nothing to do a clear hour before her father would be home. She knew it would never do to sit down now and undo the good wrought by her determination; so she put on her hat, intending to go across to Covent Garden and get a few flowers with which to beautify the room, when she heard some one asking for her in the hall below.

She leaned over the balusters, trying to see who the unwelcome visitor was, but caught only a glimpse of a gray-clothed pair of shoulders and of a huge bunch of lovely flowers before they disappeared under the intervening stairs.

A minute afterward she was shaking hands with Capt. Pelling.

"You will forgive my intrusion for the sake of the flowers, won't you, Miss Mallett? I got them to make me up a bunch of those I thought you would like best. Isn't the color of that rose splendid? And the mignonette smells so fresh. I don't know whether I like the smell of mignonette or of wallflowers the best. Which do you prefer?"

"Wallflowers, I think, because they seem to belong more positively to the country."

"So they do. All the London men grow mignonette, but they have left the wallflowers alone up to the present. Won't you get some dishes and put the flowers in water now? They look a little thirsty already, don't they?"

Ethel gladly set about what was to her a labor of love. She reached down some large dark-blue dishes from over the mantelpiece, and began fingering the flowers tenderly, laying them loosely in the handsome porcelain, interspersing the green plentifully among the lovely blossoms. Pelling sat in Mr. Mallett's own particular chair, watching her with a great contentment in his honest eyes. But he wondered a little what had caused the wearied look on her face, and he wished with all his heart that circumstances gave him a right to inquire about it.

She looked up presently and divined something of what was passing in his mind, even fancied he knew something of the truth, and was perhaps pitying her. A hot, angry, distressing blush rushed over her face, and he concluded at once that the worry was in some way connected with that somebody who was "Ethel's affair." He was instantly engrossed with one of Mr. Mallett's paintings on the wall, and took care not to distress her again by his too-evident interest.

"I don't remember this one when I used to come here before I went abroad; I like it very much. How was it I never saw you in those days, Miss Mallett?"

"I suppose I was at school. How long since is it?"

"Between four and five years."

"I was at a convent in France at that time, learning my lessons like a good child."

"I can believe that of you."

"Believe what?"

"Believe that you were a good child."

"On what do you found that belief?"

"Present appearances."

He hoped Ethel would smile at this, and so she did; but there was so little effect from the performance that he decided not to try again. "By Jove," he thought, "tears would be jollier than such a smile as that!"

Ethel, as if suddenly remembering something, then turned to him.

"Do you know I sent you a telegram this morning? I suppose you left home before it arrived?"

It was more an assertion than a question.

"And its import?" asked the artful captain.

"That we intend lunching with you, to-morrow."

"That's good hearing. And your friends? I hope it will be a nice party. How many shall I tell Mrs. Crichton to prepare for?"

He did not look at her as he asked this, but began abruptly to arrange a posy himself.

"There will be only papa and I."

He seemed to realize the true state of affairs as he remarked the painful steadiness of the short reply, and he was seized with a mad desire to horsewhip some unknown perfidious lover. Yet, in spite of his yearning pity for the plucky little girl, his heart quickened joyfully at the thought that perhaps this man's unfaithfulness had left the road open for him.

"I'm glad of it!" he returned, heartily—and he meant it. "I shall call at my club on the way back, and leave a message that I am not at home for those everlasting bores with whom I went to Africa, so that we may enjoy the quiet of the country. Now I have seen the flowers safe, I must be off, or Jim will bless me for keeping the horses standing in the sun. I am a perfect slave to those animals, Miss Mallett—truth, I assure you! Good-by, or rather *au revoir*!"

Ethel was surprised to find how little the effort had been to entertain Captain Pelling, never for a moment ascribing her success to the true cause—his determination to entertain her.

As for Pelling, he stopped again at Covent Garden on his way back, and purchased grapes, peaches, pears, pine-apples, and Heaven knows what, until Jim was fenced in with his purchases. At night the captain set the chairs in the drawing-room window as they had been when Ethel sat there listening to the story of his foolish marriage. Rather sheepish he looked while he was doing it, as if ashamed to acknowledge his folly to himself; but, when it was done, he sat contentedly puffing his cigar, looking at the place where she had sat, and where he hoped she would sit again on the morrow and on many morrows; and his plain but perfectly well-bred face looked almost handsome, beaming with the benevolence of his thoughts, as he pictured the love and happiness with which he would surround Ethel if he only had the chance.

CHAPTER IX.

JACK's love-making went on swimmingly during the lovely summer weather and among the beauties of Mallingford. The house was full of visitors now, and, in accordance with Pauline's wishes, their engagement was kept strictly private, and they enjoyed each

other's society only as occasion served. Still, in spite of all their care, the state of affairs was pretty shrewdly guessed at by most of the people about them, and the well-bred guests wondered immensely at Miss Mallings's sudden fit of unworldliness. Strangely enough, Babette, with all her sharpness, was one of the last to hear of her mistress' infatuation for the "artist-chap," as he was scornfully described among the servants; but the moment she did hear of it she began wondering and watching until in her own mind she was sure that Miss Mallings was really deeply in love with this good-looking M. Dornton. Babette liked Jack—as indeed most of the servants did, although they looked upon him as rather belonging to their own rank in life than their mistress'—and, knowing, as she believed she did, the evil of Pauline's heart, she was sorry to think that such an altogether too charming young man should be so thrown away.

There was another and a more powerful motive for her dislike to the match. She guessed, with a woman's keenness in such matters, that this was the one love of Pauline's life, and she told herself that she would give five years of her own existence to be able to rob her of her lover. If she could only find out what the secret worry was that caused Miss Mallings's occasional fits of dejection! If it was a disgraceful secret, how joyfully she would betray it to this new lover and send him away from his lady-fair forever! What happiness it would be to her to stay and watch the anguish and misery she had caused! How she would gloat over Miss Mallings's despair and revel in her heart-aches!

So Babette was always on the watch for some clew that would help her to discover her young mistress' secret; and at this time she showed great interest in Mrs. Perkins' gossip about the family, hoping to glean some scrap of information that might be of use to her in furthering her revengeful purpose.

"And, if mademoiselle had married against the wishes of Milord Summers, or without his consent, she would have lost the whole estate?" she asked, one evening in August, as she sipped her tea leisurely in the one hour during the day that she was sure of a rest from Pauline's everlasting requirements.

"Yes, if she did so before she was twenty-five; but after her twenty-fifth birthday she will be free to marry whomsoever she pleases; and, as she will be twenty-five on the seventeenth of next month, there is not much chance of her sacrificing the estate at this time of day, after waiting until now."

"That is so," observed Babette, with a disappointed air. She reflected for a few moments, and a flash of intelligence crossed her face as she asked, "And if mademoiselle had married in her extreme youth—what you call 'on the sly'—before she had known she was the heiress of this property—how then?"

She put the question quietly enough; but her eyes were glittering with excitement as she awaited Mrs. Perkins' reply.

"I should think she would lose everything."

"Who would have it after her?"

"Sir Geoffrey, the late baronet's brother."

"To be sure! It must have been a great blow to him when he

found himself robbed of everything by his brother's injustice. What did he do? Where did he go?"

"I don't know. He is as proud as any of the family, and, when his brother told him never to come near the place again, as it should never be his while there was another Malling in the world to inherit it—that was when he told him of his marriage, you know—he put on his hat without one word, and walked away with his head as high as if he were the heir of thousands. We've never seen a sight of him or his since that day, and it's my belief we never shall."

"I should think he must hate Miss Malling."

"Very likely; I think I should look upon her as a usurper if I was him."

Babette believed she had found the key-note to Pauline's secret trouble. That there was a secret trouble she never doubted for one instant. She had observed her mistress too closely to be misled on that point; she knew that nothing but some mighty fear could cause those sudden starts, followed by periods of anxious, heavy-browed thought, to which she was subject: and, when Babette went upstairs, she reasoned the matter out.

"I have heard that she never knew she was her uncle's heiress until after her father's death. What is more likely than she should have married out there in Italy—married some poor idiot who was caught by her pretty face? And then, when my lady suddenly finds that she is a rich woman, she is tired of this poor fool, and runs away and enjoys her life by herself. The change of name too would help her in hiding from him. I believe I have found the dark spot in my fine lady's life! If this is as I think, I can take from her her beloved *fiancé* and her riches at one blow. How glorious that would be!"

Her face glowed with savage satisfaction at the bare thought of so complete a revenge. She left her seat by the window of Pauline's dressing-room, and paced up and down, her excitement being too great for her to remain still.

"If such a marriage did take place she is too cunning to keep any proof of it about her. She was most likely married at Naples after her father's death. I wonder how much money it would take to search for the certificate? I would spend my last *sou* to find proof!"

Babette shook as if with an ague, as fresh ideas crowded on her, and plan after plan passed through her brain, each to be rejected as soon as formed. Her pace unconsciously quickened, as if in a vain attempt to keep up with her thoughts, until she was walking as if for a wager, and her hot hands passed over each other unceasingly.

The dusky gloom deepened until the room was all in shadow, and presently a housemaid came in and lighted the candles in the large silver branches on the toilet-table. She tried to entice the Frenchwoman into a chat, but it was of no avail; and the girl retired mumbling:

"Who is she to give herself such airs? Never to answer when she is spoken to indeed!"

As the door closed behind the disappointed gossip, Babette resumed her promenade up and down the now brilliantly lighted room, reached the end where the table was, and came to a sudden stop as

her eyes rested on the key left in the lock of a small bronze box. This box contained Miss Mallings's private keys! She locked up very little; but what she did lock up she was rather particular about, and her keys were invariably kept in this Indian box, the key of which she carried about with her.

As Babette stood looking with a dull, fascinated gaze at the key, she heard the rustle of silken skirts in the gallery outside. With a swoop like a hawk's, so swift and noiseless was it, she plucked the little key from the lock and slipped it into the pocket of her dainty frilled apron. The next instant Miss Mallings turned the handle of the door, opened it, and saw Babette rearranging the lace draperies round the looking-glass.

She crossed the room and went straight to the table, glanced quickly at the box, and then turned to Babette.

"Have you seen the key of this box?"

"Not to-day, mademoiselle."

"Provoking!" She took it up in her hands and shook it. "Yes, the keys are inside. Babette, I wish you not to leave these rooms to-night until I come up to bed. I have dropped the key somewhere. I don't suppose it will be found until we have daylight to help us—it is so small. Have your supper sent up to you here."

"Very good, mademoiselle."

Miss Mallings gave certain little touches to her dress and trinkets, arranged her front hair, took a clean handkerchief from the scented box on the table, saturated it with perfume, and then left the room, saying as she did so:

"Remember, you must not leave these rooms upon any pretext."

Babette stood with her hands held tightly over her heart, listening to the rustle of the silken skirts along the gallery and down the stairs, until the sound was lost in the distance. Then her expression changed from strained attention to vivid triumph. She threw her clasped hands high over her head, and whispered through her closed teeth:

"She has some proofs somewhere! She is not so wise as I thought her. She has kept something that will condemn her if it is found; and I will find it this night. I must be careful; I will not do anything until the men have gone to the drawing-room, and she will then be pretty safe with her *cher* Monsieur Dornton. Oh, but it is sweet, this revenge!"

She sat down by the window to live through the half hour of waiting, and never moved a muscle until the scent of a cigar rising from the terrace below roused her. She pulled the curtain aside an inch or two, and looked cautiously out.

Pauline and Jack found their self-restricted intercourse very tedious, and often wished the houseful of visitors at the uttermost ends of the earth. This evening, by previous arrangement, they were having a few minutes of stolen bliss.

The moon was at its full, and Pauline was asking Jack if he remembered that it was the last month's full moon which saw their first happy confidential chat; and she murmured softly of the rapid growth of love between them since that time.

"If anything were to happen now to part us, I should go mad or put an end to my life!"

The words were uttered with intense emphasis; and, while Jack soothed her with a sense of unrest in his own heart, the vindictive face peering through the lace curtains above gleamed with a fierce hope of verifying the passionate words.

At last Babette heard the men's voices as they crossed the hall. She looked at the time-piece, and patiently watched the minute hand travel slowly over ten minutes.

"They must be settled now, and I will begin my search."

She locked both doors, closed one window to prevent the blinds from fluttering, and then unlocked the small bronze box.

"It is an excellent casket for keys, so small and pretty that one could carry it anywhere, and so strong that nothing short of a stone-breaker's hammer could force it open. And yet, *ma foi*, of what use is all this strength and cunning when one has the key?"

She laughed as she picked out a key from the bunch and tried to unlock Pauline's large desk.

"At last!" she whispered, as the lock of the desk flew back.

She began methodically to remove every article singly, placing them neatly in a heap on the table, after reading or looking at them. She emptied one side of the desk, then refilled it, being very careful to put the things back in the order in which she had found them. Then she turned to the other side going through it in the same way, and reached the bottom without discovering anything more than is usually to be found in a lady's desk. With a disappointed air, she began to replace the articles. Her nerves were in a highly wrought state, and the sudden sound of the piano in the room below so startled her that Miss Mallings's address-book fell from her shaking hand on to the floor.

She stooped to pick it up as it lay open; and, in doing so, she saw the edge of a photograph peeping from the pocket in the cover. She took it out hurriedly, scattering, as she did so, some dead pressed violets on to the table. She shuddered when she raised the tissue-paper, for it was the photograph of a grave!

She went to the dressing-table, where the candles were still burning, to read the name of the photographer at the back of the card. The printing was in a language she did not understand; but she guessed it must be Spanish from the word "*senhor*." She turned to the picture again, and in the strong light she could almost make out part of the inscription on the plain headstone. The first name, she was sure, began with the letter "P." In order to assist her, she procured Miss Mallings's magnifying-glass, and, with the aid of that, she spelled out the name, or as much of it as she could see, for the first few letters of the second name were obliterated by a blemish in the photograph.

"P-a-u-l-i-n-e" she could clearly trace; then came a blot, followed by "l-l-i-n-g, d-i-e-d M-a-y 18—." The remainder of the inscription was undistinguishable.

"*Mon Dieu*, I never expected this! The grave of Pauline Mallings! Then who is my mistress? An adventuress—a usurper! And I shall have a hand in dethroning her!"

She wiped the perspiration from her white, quivering face, placed the photograph in her dress, and locked the desk.

CHAPTER X.

JACK was by no means heartless, and his conscience pricked him more often than was pleasant with regard to Ethel Mallett. To be sure, she was the first to suggest that they should separate; but then it was most certainly his shameful neglect that had driven her to do it. He wondered a little if she had really ceased to care for him, if she had yet found a successor to him, or if pique alone had led her to offer him his freedom. She had sent him back the little ring he put on her finger when they were so happy together, and, with a strange inconsistency, he carried it about with him continually; he had become so used to having it in his vest pocket that he felt annoyed if he put his hand there and did not find it.

Just about this time Jack began to think that he ought to call in Buckingham Street, if only to show his gratitude for Mr. Mallett's many past kindnesses, for the old gentleman had often been able and always willing to do Jack a good turn in past days. Once convinced that he ought to do a thing, Jack did it, unless Miss Malling used her influence against it, in which case duty was ruthlessly thrown to the wall, for her power over his head and heart was just now unlimited.

Jack was uncomfortably conscious of his own weakness in her hands, and he condescended to diplomatize a little in order to carry out his wish without obstruction.

The morrow would be the first of September, and the house was full of people who had been invited to enjoy the abundant sport Mallingford offered. A number of amiable young men were lounging about the corridors and billiard-room all day, who talked of nothing but the probable weather on the morrow, the chances for and against good sport, and the respective merits of their own and other men's guns. Jack obtained a few words with Pauline before breakfast, and carried his point.

"I must have several things for to-morrow," he said. "I know you would not wish me to be different from others, and I can not get what I want without going to town myself."

Pauline would have dearly liked to go with him, for she had a horrible fear that he would find out something if he should call on the Malletts. She was not supposed to know of the existence of such people—for Jack had never spoken of them to her—so she could not well ask him not to call on them; and she could not leave her guests without some very serious reason; consequently she was forced to feign a complacency she was far from feeling as she answered:

"Of course, if you must go, there is nothing more to be said; but you will not stay one half hour longer than is absolutely necessary? If I don't know where you are, I have such a feeling of unrest and anxiety that life becomes a sorrow for the time being."

There was honest truth in these words, and Jack was flattered and grateful for her love. He kissed the beautiful lips, and promised to be back at the very earliest moment possible.

I shall not feel so foolish when we are married, I dare say, because then you will be my own, and no one can take you from me; but you would pity me if you could know how the fear of losing you overcomes me when you are away. I feel no safety, no security in your love until I see your dear truthful eyes looking into mine once more."

When Jack was in the train, with a quiet half hour before him for thought, he felt curiously cloyed with the sweets of love, and was ungrateful enough to wish that Pauline would leave the love-making a little more in his hands, and that her affection was of a less assertive character.

Two or three hours later, when he had rushed through the business of the day and stood in the Malletts' sitting-room, shaking hands with both father and daughter and exchanging cordial greetings, he felt as if he had been living in a hot-house of affections for the past weeks, and had just regained the invigorating open air, where the hardier, healthier class of feelings flourish.

He wondered a little at Mr. Mallett's geniality, knowing nothing of Ethel's generosity in taking the entire responsibility of their separation upon herself, and still less of her father's hope that she had got rid of a nameless nobody just in time to leave the road clear for a suitor more worthy of her in every way; and Jack felt somewhat piqued that Mr. Mallett should make so light of the whole business.

But he did not let his annoyance appear upon the surface. He told of the success of the paintings for Lord Summers, of his hopes for the future, of the gay life at Mallingsford, and impressed his hearers with the fact that he was brimming over with good fortune and happiness.

Ethel did not say much; but she appeared to be quietly, kindly interested; and, though she was paler than she used to be, she did not give one the idea of a love-lorn damsel. She sat listening to the conversation, and wondering if her father would touch on the subject of their identity during Jack's visit; but Mr. Mallett did not wish to be made the topic of gossip among Miss Mallings's guests, and therefore kept his own counsel.

When Jack was about to leave, Mr. Mallett decided to walk part of the way with him, and accordingly went down-stairs first. Jack turned, with the door-handle in his hand, to thank Ethel for what she had done—yet hardly to thank her either.

"I can't go without thanking you for being so candid with me, Ethel," he said. "Of course I was very surprised when I received your letter breaking off the engagement; but equally of course there was nothing for me to do but acquiesce in your wish."

Ethel felt how ungenerous this remark was, seeing that his neglect had led to what had happened; but she would not be driven into reproaching him, and so give him cause to justify himself. Her feelings were too real to bear dissection, and she avoided the discussion.

"That is all passed," she said, gravely; "better let it rest."

Though she did not say one word in self-defense, there was a world of reproach in the subdued tones of her voice; though her

speech was so indifferent, her whole manner asserted her right to be considered more than blameless throughout the affair.

Jack felt miserably small under her calm gaze, and his respect for her was vastly increased by this little passage at arms; and, as he was carried by the afternoon express back to Mallington Park, he could not shake from his mind the fable of the dog and the shadow.

Pauline hovered round him more than usual that evening.

"How was it that you could not get back until the 4:50?" she asked, as they stood leaning over a pile of music, searching for a song.

"I found my gun was out of repair, and I had to leave it with the gunsmith for a couple of hours."

"And how did you spend those two hours? You must have found it dreadfully wearisome with two hours on your hands and not a Christian left in town to go to see."

"There is always the club."

Pauline raised her eyes, sparkling with inquisitiveness, slowly to him.

"Surely you would find the club a very dull place! And were you really driven to endure two hours at an empty club-house because you had nothing better to do? Poor old boy! I am sorry for you."

Jack thought he detected a touch of sarcasm in her tone, and, knowing that he was deceiving her, he could not check the tell-tale color that came into his face. But then he remembered she knew nothing about the Malletts, and he was surprised at her persistent curiosity.

She looked at him smilingly, and went on:

"I am not the only person who has missed you. Bertha Collins has been bemoaning your absence all the afternoon. She says you are the only man in the house who can devote a thought to us poor women during the delirium of the gun-fever. Now, just look at those creatures on the rug. I'm convinced that you won't hear a dozen words spoken among them to-night without the introduction of the word 'gun,' 'dog,' 'cartridge,' or 'bird.'"

"Don't be too hard on them, Pauline," said the Hon. Miss Collins, as she joined them. "We are just as bad sometimes."

"I don't admit that, Bertha."

"Well, I know for a week before Ascot I can think and talk of nothing but what I am going to wear."

"You are the embodiment of candor, Miss Collins," Jack declared.

He felt grateful to the merry little brunette for her timely interruption of Pauline's cross-examination, and induced her to stay by pushing a chair forward and coaxing her into it. He did not care to resume his *tête-à-tête* just then. Pauline took her part in the conversation; but she was burning with jealousy, for she had read the tell-tale flush, and knew that Jack had not told her the whole truth about his afternoon's doings.

"Yes, I think I am candid," Miss Collins responded. "But, between ourselves, I only make a virtue of necessity. You men know all our failings so well that it is of no use to deny their existence; therefore, I gain credit for the one virtue of truthfulness by just ad-

mitting an established fact when I confess to vanity, jealousy of my sex, and selfishness."

"Rather sweeping, is it not?"

"Perhaps; but I don't believe in doing things by halves; and I'm quite sure you don't, Mr. Dornton."

"I feel highly honored."

"Why do you think that, Bertha?" asked Pauline.

Miss Collins actually blushed.

Well, I've just made a declaration that truth is my only virtue, so I'll tell you, although I'm rather ashamed of myself. The other day I was dozing on one of the window-seats in the picture-gallery. When I woke up, Mr. Dornton was at work destroying paintings. He cut some oils into pieces with a knife, and the water-colors he tore into fragments. I was mean enough to keep quite still and watch him; and when he had finished, I was still meaner, for I went and looked at some of the fragments, and I believe that they were all portraits of the same brown-haired lady. I drew my own conclusions—and I dare say you will draw yours, Mr. Dornton, and set me down as the most impudent girl you ever met; but you know the old saying about speaking the truth, and—"

She pulled herself up, and Jack laughed heartily. Pauline glanced at him with unmixed approbation, and he felt that he should not be badgered again as to how he had passed his day in town.

Still, although there was peace between them, Pauline went to her room with a strange sense of defeat, for she knew Jack had evaded her question, and she could account for his doing it only by believing that he had called upon the Malletts.

"But," she argued, "Ethel has kept silence on the subject of that anonymous letter, or else Jack would surely have guessed at the sender and in some way shown his displeasure."

Babette noticed the anxious expression on her mistress' face as she brushed her hair for the night, and she fondly believed that the key to it was securely sewn up in leather and tacked to her corset; but for once the keen French girl was wide of the mark. It was not the past but the future that was troubling Pauline. She fancied that Jack's love had cooled somewhat since the first days of their courtship, and her heart went out in a wild prayer that nothing might come between her and the man she loved so entirely. She told herself that she would be willing to give up wealth, worldly position—everything—and count poverty a blessing, if only to retain his love.

Ethel, too, in her solitude, had an unhappy time of it that night. She did not disguise the fact that Jack's visit had been a sad ordeal to her. She had guessed how matters stood between him and Miss Malling from a few words which he had let fall—words which her brave, faithful heart had been all too ready to interpret—and she tried to resign herself calmly to the fate which was overtaking her slowly, but none the less surely.

Captain Pelling was often in Buckingham Street now. He turned up unexpectedly at all hours of the day, and always came with some elaborately-prepared excuse, and was so gentle and delicate in his manner that Ethel at times felt herself a perfect monster of ingratitude because she could not give what she knew he had staked his

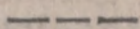
all to possess, and what she knew was no longer within her power to give.

"If I had but known him before I met Jack!" she cried, despairingly, as she laid her head on her pillow on the night after Jack's visit. "He is so good, so straightforward, so tender and manly, that I must have loved him if I had not already loved the other. And the dad—the dear, loving, hard-working old dad—has set his heart on it too, I can see. It seems so hard that two good men should be disappointed of the one wish of their hearts because a foolish girl can not forget her first love—a first love who has already forgotten her, and bound himself to another!"

That was the bitterest drop in her cup of sorrow.

"If Captain Pelling asks me to be his wife, I will tell him everything; and then he shall decide for himself. I don't think he will care to marry a woman who loves somebody else."

And with this comforting thought she cried herself to sleep.



CHAPTER XI.

THE rain was coming down in torrents, and there was a general expression of disappointment on the men's faces round the breakfast-table at Mallingford Park.

"But you know it is really too bad," Cecil Danesford observed to Miss Malling, who had been trying to comfort him. "Your head man had fixed to-day for the north-end covers, and he says they are the best on the whole estate; and now this rain comes and spoils the whole thing. I dare say it will rain again to-morrow; and then I shall have to return without having had a pop at them. It is annoying, you must allow!"

"Poor creatures—men!" said Bertha Collins, reflectively. "The comfort of their lives depends upon the one amusement of the hour. Deprive them of that, and they are stranded helplessly. Glad I'm a woman!"

"So am I," replied Cecil, promptly.

"Can't see why that should be so, unless you think I should take the shine out of some of you if I were a man."

"You are sharp!" he says, looking at her admiringly through his glass. How do you do it? Doesn't it tire you awfully, sometimes?"

"No; I'm too used to it," she replied, with an excellent imitation of his drawl.

"Well, I hope you will have got over the first rush of slaughter by the seventeenth," Pauline interposed, bringing the conversation back to the original subject.

"Why by the seventeenth?" several asked.

"Because I shall then attain my long-deferred majority, and dear old Lord Summers insists that there will be a big affair on the happy occasion."

"A ball? Delightful!" exclaimed the ladies.

"And I sha'n't be here!" muttered Cecil to Bertha.

"Perhaps we shall not mourn," returned that pert young lady.

A crushing retort was on his lip, when his attention was suddenly

arrested by an advertisement in the "Times," which he held in his hand.

"By all that's mysterious!" he exclaimed; and then he sat gazing at the newspaper in mute astonishment.

"What have you found, Danesford?"

"Don't keep it all to yourself, man!"

Bertha leaned across, and looked at the place he was pointing at.

"How extraordinary!" she exclaimed.

"For pity's sake, let us into the mystery!" Pauline said; and Bertha read out the following advertisement:

"'Mallingford Park.—If this should meet the eye of Sir G. M., he will hear of something to his decided advantage by applying to Messrs. Daws & Raven, 16 Leman Street, E. C.'"

There was general astonishment, and various were the surmises as to what it could mean. Jack, glancing at Pauline, was surprised to see her agitated and white to the lips. She motioned to him not to notice it, and fought determinedly with her emotion. The others were too absorbed by their curiosity to take much heed, and by a strong effort she, to all appearance, regained her composure, and bore herself as usual until breakfast was finished.

"Will you help Mrs. Sefton and me to finish filling in the cards for the seventeenth?" she asked Jack, as she left the breakfast-room.

Jack promised to join them in the *boudoir* in a quarter of an hour, and went off to the conservatory to smoke a cigar. He did not like to think of Pauline's look. He was a poor struggling artist, who had hitherto lived by the exercise of his own unaided talent, and Pauline was a rich, high-born woman, his superior in most things that count in this world; yet he would not make her his wife if he did not believe her honor to be spotless and without flaw. This was the idea that haunted him as he recalled her look at the breakfast-table. If ever a woman's face expressed suddenly-aroused guilty fear, his *fiancée's* had done so when Bertha Collins read that advertisement in the "Times." He went back to the breakfast-room before he joined Pauline, read the advertisement again, and copied the address into his note-book.

"If I am in the neighborhood, with a few moments to spare, I may look them up and see what it means," he decided.

Then he followed the ladies to the *boudoir*.

Pauline, still looking unlike herself, was sitting with Mrs. Sefton. Jack said nothing then, but went straight to his work of filling in the invitations from the list of names given him; still he could not help wondering what could have caused such extraordinary emotion on the part of one who was generally so impassive, so languid and unemotional in her bearing. Mrs. Sefton left the room after a time; and Pauline, turning to Jack, put her hand entreatingly on his arm.

"I know what you are going to ask me; but I can't talk about it just now—not to-day. I will tell you to-morrow, or the day after; but don't speak of it now. I ask it as a favor."

Jack felt perplexed. He had expected, the moment they were

alone together, that she would tell him what had caused her disquiet. He felt unhappy and worried, yet he could hardly force her to speak upon a subject that evidently distressed her.

"Of course, I don't want to worry you, darling," he answered; "but I must confess I am curious, and I shall be glad when you can tell me all about it without distressing yourself."

"Thank you very much, dear. And now I want to ask you if there is any one you would like me to send a card to for this ball."

Jack flushed as he replied:

"Yes; there are two people I should like you to invite—Mr. Mallett and his daughter. They are everything desirable, or I should not suggest it; and the old gentleman was very kind to me in the days that are gone."

"Was the daughter kind, too, Jack?"—playfully.

Again Jack flushed a little.

"I think you are a bit of a witch," he said, with a laugh. "I may as well tell you, and then there will be no secret in my past for you to find out by and by. Yes, she was kind to me, and once I thought I liked her well enough to make her my wife; but that was before I met you, you siren!"

"You don't think so now?"

"If I did, should I be here?"

Pauline pushed her chair close to his.

"If I had found that out for myself, instead of hearing it from you, I should have forgiven it. I could forgive you everything that is past, but nothing in the present. Can you say the same to me?"

"I think so;" and he kissed the face resting on his shoulder. "I could forgive you everything in the past that did not touch my wife's honor."

"You are less generous than I am; you make a reservation."

Jack met the beautiful brown eyes fixed anxiously on his, and smiled.

"You must know that there is an immeasurable difference between a woman's fair name and a man's."

She sighed gently, and Jack thought he liked that pathetic mood better than any other. Mrs. Sefton returning at that moment, Jack asked:

"Then I may send those cards?"

The question at once flashed through Pauline's mind. "Is there danger to me in their coming here?" and she decided that their presence in one place or another could neither lessen nor increase her danger. She felt more sure of Jack since he had told her about Ethel, and she rather doubted whether her uncle would care to come to Mallingford Park, under his *incognito*, as he would be certain to meet people who would recognize him; so she gave a hearty consent to the invitations being sent.

The rain continued to pour down steadily, and the scratch, scratch of the busy pens went on without interruption. Pauline finished her list first, and sat back in her chair, with a thoughtful, chastened look on her face which was strangely unlike her usual imperious air. Jack noted it, and thought her more beautiful, if that were possible, although he wondered what had brought about so

great a change. He felt a forewarning that this was the little cloud in their sky that would darken the whole heavens.

"At last!" he exclaimed, as he threw down his pen.

"You have been a good boy," Pauline said, with a smile. "We could not have finished them to-day without your help."

"I think you have written too much, my dear; you look quite fagged," Mrs. Sefton remarked, as she dropped the notes into the post-bag. "If I were you, I should take a good rest after luncheon, or you will not be fit to entertain your county neighbors this evening."

"That is sound advice, and I will follow it. It is such a bore to be compelled to entertain folk that one does not care for."

She turned to Jack as Mrs. Sefton left the room with the bag.

"That is one of the duties that I shall so gladly hand over to you by and by."

Jack was throwing the scraps of torn paper into the waste-paper basket and did not answer."

For a moment she looked surprised, then her face darkened, and she left the room abruptly. She had fancied all the morning that she had detected a coldness on Jack's part, and had thrown out this allusion to their future relations as a feeler. The result had realized her worst fears, and she locked herself in her dressing room in utter despair.

"So I shall lose him, after all, if I can not satisfactorily explain this morning's fright! He will not allow a secret between us. What can I do? If I concoct a lie to account for it, there may be an advertisement in to-morrow's paper that will expose it. Who can want to find Geoffrey Malling after allowing me undisputed possession for the last six years? If they find him, they will tell all, and he will claim his inheritance; they can not want him for anything else. I must discover how much they know, or how can I fight them? I can't trust another; I must do it myself;" and, with these thoughts running through her mind, she crossed to the bell, which Babette promptly answered. "Babette, I want to run up to London this afternoon, and I don't want the whole house to know about it."

Babette's eyes flashed with a quick glance of intelligence; but her lids drooped instantly, and she answered, meekly:

"Certainly, mademoiselle."

"If the people see the brougham leaving the house, it will set them wondering; so I want you to run down to the village during luncheon and bring back one of the public flies from the inn there. Tell the man to drive to the stable-yard—in fact, you can come back in it; and let it be there by a quarter past three."

"Very good, mademoiselle."

"Are your boots thick? and your cloak, is it waterproof?"

"Mademoiselle is very good to think of such things. I shall be all right."

"There is the luncheon bell. Don't talk about it among the servants; and don't be later than a quarter past three."

Babette's face gleamed with cruel delight behind Pauline's back, as she left the room.

"So you can think about Babette's boots and cloak when it is to

serve your own purpose? And you think you have only to go to Messieurs Daws & Rayen and show your pretty face, and maybe a ten-pound note or so, and they will tell you all about the person who sent them that advertisement! But you do not outwit a French-woman so simply, my good friend! Mr. Daws is quite prepared to receive you with politeness, and to tell you that he really knows nothing more than that his client, whom he is not at liberty to name, is anxious to obtain the address of the present Sir Geoffrey;" and the girl chuckled grimly as she went along. "That old Daws will hardly risk losing his share of the plunder, even to oblige so sweet, so handsome, so soft-voiced a lady as you, madame!" and she laughed again as she pictured the meeting between her mistress and the lawyer. "I wish I could be there to see!"

Pauline stopped to speak to Jack as they crossed the hall after luncheon.

"I shall lie down for the whole afternoon; my head is aching so dreadfully. What will you do with yourself, Jack? A wet day is such a terrible infliction in a country-house!"

"I shall work," Jack answered. "It's a week to-day since I touched a brush; it will be a grand opportunity!"

"Where shall you be?"

"In the picture gallery. It will be quieter there than downstairs."

"If I feel better, I will come to you there by and by."

"I should rather advise your taking a good rest while you can get it," Jack responded, in a matter-of-fact tone.

Pauline set her teeth in her under-lip and left him, her mind racked with anxiety and fear.

"At all cost I must be in a position to tell him something that will not be contradicted. I must find out how much those people know before to-night."

CHAPTER XII.

PAULINE made an effort to look unlike herself; but hers was an individuality not easily hidden under a large plaid traveling wrap and a plain black bonnet and veil.

At any rate, Mr. Daws was not deceived by them, and guessed who his visitor was the moment she was shown into his dusty little private office.

Pauline's spirits rose wonderfully as she saw how shabby was the little place in which these people carried on their business. She decided that she would first find out how much they knew that she wished unknown, then their object in advertising for Geoffrey Mallings; and, if it should be detrimental to her interests, then she would buy them over—dazzle these poor little grubbers by the offer of five hundred pounds.

She forgot that Messrs. Daws & Raven were probably not the first movers in the matter, and that, if they failed toward their client, others would be found to take their place. All she thought of just then was the danger of losing Jack's love. If she could only defer this hidden enemy's action until she was his wife, she would chance the rest.

She looked at the little man who rose from his writing on her entrance, and her spirits fell again. This shabby person, with the iron-gray hair sticking all ways at once, the bushy eyebrows, broad mouth, square chin, and generally unwashed, unbrushed appearance, had a natural air of antagonism about him. Pauline felt depressed as she seated herself in the chair placed for her by the office boy.

Mr. Daws remained standing, silent and motionless, with his bright, bead-like eyes watching her from under his heavy brows until she felt almost hysterical.

She plucked at the fringe of her heavy shawl, cleared her throat once or twice, regained her self-possession with an effort, and looked the hideous little man straight in the face as she spoke.

"I have come with reference to an advertisement in this morning's 'Times.'"

She paused, hoping he would say something that might give her an opening. The little man jerked his head abruptly, but made no remark.

"I believe you inserted it?" Pauline added.

"No." The syllable sounded sharp and clear.

"No?" She looked incredulous for a moment, then said: "Then, if you did not, you know who did."

Mr. Daws jerked his head again.

"And you will favor me with their address."

"What for?"

"I wish to see them."

"Why?"

"Why!" Pauline drew herself up proudly, for she was getting irritated, as she answered. "I think that is my business."

"Not at all! It is ours."

She was just on the point of rising, and leaving the office in dignified silence, when she remembered that, if she lost that chance of finding out the real meaning of the advertisement, she might not have another.

"You will surely not refuse to let me have the address of the person who put that notice in this morning's 'Times,' when I tell you that I came on Sir Geoffrey's behalf. I am, in fact, a relative of his."

"What relative?"

"His niece."

"He hasn't a niece."

Without apparently noticing the assertion of the lawyer Pauline shifted her ground.

"What is the object of the advertisement?" she asked.

"You've read it, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you know."

"It says it is for Sir Geoffrey's 'decided advantage.' But how?"

"That's my client's business."

"Don't you know?"

"Lawyers never reveal their clients' affairs."

"But, if you will neither tell me yourself nor give me your cli-

ent's address, how can I find out for Sir Geoffrey what the advantage is?"

"Send him here himself."

This was just what Pauline dreaded.

"He can't come. He's very ill," she told the lawyer.

"Then we must wait until he's well."

"You will absolutely tell nobody but himself what this wonderful advantage is?"

"No one."

Pauline rose from her chair, and they looked steadily at each other for a few seconds. She gathered her energies for her last effort. She placed her hand on the table between them, and leaned forward slightly.

"What is your price for the address I want?"

Daws' eyes glittered. Two thoughts passed through his mind before he answered: "You have shown your fear by the offer of a bribe; and Heaven save the Frenchwoman if I betray her, for you will certainly murder her!" Then he spoke:

"The information you ask for is priceless."

"I can give more than you think, perhaps. One hundred pounds!" A pause. "Two hundred—three hundred—four hundred—five!"

"I have answered; it is priceless."

She looked for one instant as if she would spring on him and tear the secret from him; then there came the sullen look of one beaten and baffled, and she turned without another word, went down the rickety stairs, and re-entered the cab which had been waiting for her.

The little lawyer stood still for a minute, listening to the creaking of the stairs under her tread; then he turned and opened a door behind him, and from a dark closet emerged a human being even more unwashed and unbrushed than himself.

The two men looked at each other for a moment; then, moved by a common feeling, they broke into peals of harsh laughter. They laughed loud and long, until, absolutely breathless, they sunk into their chairs. Then the dirtier of the two leaned over and shook Daws' hand heartily.

"You're right, Raven. We can shake hands with ourselves. Our case is a better one than I thought. By Jove, you should have seen her face when I said Sir Geoffrey had no niece! She came to pump, did she? Well, she found the pump dry!"

And they laughed again, until the boy in the outer room wondered what piece of villainy was being concocted to make his masters so unusually merry.

* * * * *

Pauline had counted confidently on making a bargain with Messrs. Daws & Raven. She believed that some unknown person had accidentally found out certain facts of her past life which she had pressing reasons for keeping secret, and she thought she had only to offer them a good price for their silence and the matter would end there, as no doubt the first and last object of the advertisement was money. Now that she was once more in her own room,

wrapped in a warm dressing-gown, and with leisure to think, she began to see that there was something more than the mere greed of gain prompting her unknown adversary, and she could not make the vaguest guess at the real motive.

This fighting in the dark was alarming. If she only knew from what quarter to expect the attack, she might be able to make some sort of resistance; as it was, there was nothing to be done but sit down and calmly await the onslaught.

On one point only could she make up her mind—she must hurry on her marriage. Let her once be Jack's wife, and, no matter what phantoms should rise from the past to threaten her, she would at least be sure of his love; for she would love him so dearly, she would be so gentle, so winning, that he would not be able to withhold his love from her, even though he should grieve to find her other than he had thought.

Still, she would make one more effort to unmask this hidden enemy; and, with this intention, she called Babette to her.

"Can I trust you in a matter that is almost life or death to me, Babette? if I employ you to find out a secret for me, will you keep the secret when it is found out? Will you serve me faithfully?"

"The interests of mademoiselle shall be almost as my own."

Pauline looked at her keenly for a moment; her instinct told her that she was not acting wisely in trusting this woman; yet what could she do?

Babette's face was absolutely impassive, as she stood waiting.

"I suppose all the servants have seen the advertisement headed 'Mallintord Park' in to-day's 'Times'?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"And what do they say about it?"

"Some of them—Mrs. Perkins among others—believe that somebody has found a will of the late Sir Paul's of a later date than the recognized one, in which he forgives his brother and makes him his heir."

Pauline looked relieved.

"And what is your opinion, Babette?"

"Mine, mademoiselle? I have none. It does not interest me—your English law; I trouble not myself about it."

"Do you know what I think, Babette?"

"No. How should I, mademoiselle?"

"I will tell you. When I was young, very young, I made a fool of myself—never mind how; but I did something that, if it were known now, would do me a great deal of harm. I believe that some one has found out this folly of mine, and is trying to discover Sir Geoffrey Malling's address in the hope that he will assist to secure my downfall. I would give twenty pounds to find out how much or how little this person knows of my folly, and I would give fifty pounds to any one who would bring me face to face with him."

Pauline paused; but the Frenchwoman did not raise her eyes from the ground lest they might betray her.

"I understand," she said, quietly.

"Now, will you try to find out who this is, and the extent of the knowledge possessed?"

"But how shall I begin, mademoiselle?"

“Go to these lawyers to-morrow—see them yourself—try to get the advertiser’s address from them; failing that, try to worm out the nature of the promised advantage to Sir Geoffrey, and the means by which it is to be obtained.”

“I fear I shall come back no wiser than I go; lawyers are too clever—they will know what I want. But I will go and do what I can.”

Pauline unlocked the little bronze box—the key had been found on the staircase on the morning following its loss—and took out four five-pound notes.

“Use the money carefully, or they may guess you are not doing this for yourself; and start as early as possible—I want you to be there before Sir Geoffrey. Now, make me look as well as you can—I feel awfully *passée* with all this anxiety.”

In spite of all Babette’s skillful touches, Miss Malling was not her usual brilliant self in appearance that evening. Jack saw it at once; and, unsuspecting though he was, he could not help connecting her nervous anxious manner with the much-talked-of advertisement.

“And so you really know nothing about it?” deaf old Lady Ballard was saying, when Jack entered the drawing-room, with the rest of the men, after dinner. “Well, that’s curious! Sir Thomas and I both thought, when we read it, that you were going to be generous, and hand over half the estate to your badly-treated uncle the moment you attained your twenty-fifth birthday.”

Miss Malling’s guests found the evening unaccountably dull; and one and all heard the announcement of their carriages with evident relief.

Jack felt curiously out of sorts; but he would not admit, even to himself, that it was his growing doubt of Pauline that was turning everything the seamy side out. Bertha Collins was tired, and with her usual candor, she announced the fact.

“You are tired too, Pauline, I can see. Thank goodness I’m not a large landed proprietor! I could never sacrifice my feelings to the duties of my position, as you do, and entertain those poor old fossils. Good-night, good people! Will you light my candle, Mr. Dornton?”

In the general break-up Pauline managed to whisper in Jack’s ear:

“I have something to say to you. Wait in the *boudoir*.”

Jack’s look conveyed the answer she required, while his heart lightened.

“She is going to tell me the cause of her fright this morning; and I shall be ready to beg her pardon on my knees for doubting her,” he thought.

It was rather a shock to him when Pauline joined him presently, locked the door, and walking straight up to him, said:

“Do you remember my surprise when you fixed the last day of September for our wedding? Well I have altered my mind; I want you to make me your wife on the very day after my twenty-fifth birthday. That will be on the eighteenth—this day fortnight. Will you?”

Jack looked down at Pauline, and wondered why he did not feel

madly overjoyed—as he would have felt a fortnight ago—at her proposal. He was puzzled by his own want of enthusiasm in the matter.

“You will tell me your reason for wishing this,” he said; and while he spoke he formed the idea that it was in some way connected with her fear about the advertisement.

“I have no particular reason that I can give you. It is cruel to ask me for a reason. You will ask me next to give you a reason for loving you. I think it is because my heart hungers to have some one belonging to me and to belong to some one. Mine has been such a lonely life, Jack.”

“Very well, dear. It shall be as you wish. Now I think you had better go to bed. You look quite worn out.”

“Kiss me, Jack!”

The humble tone touched him, and he felt that he was not behaving well. He took her in his strong arms, saying, solemnly, as he did so:

“Heaven bless you, dear! I hope we shall neither of us ever have cause to regret marrying in haste.”

He stood just where she left him, absorbed in deep thought, for some minutes. He half convinced himself that he did not want to marry Miss Malling at all; yet he did not know what had caused the change in his feelings. Try as he would, he could not recall any single action of hers that had caused this alteration in him.

“After asking a woman to be my wife, I can’t suddenly refuse to marry her because she goes white over a mysterious advertisement; nor can I throw her over because she is so awfully fond of me. After all, I believe there is such a thing as a woman being too fond of a fellow. I’m sure of one thing—and that is, that I am bad at heart; and the only thing for me to do is to get married with the best grace I can. All the same, I wish I had never seen this place at all!”

Thus he grumbled on his way up to his room, where he sat far on into the morning, marveling how he could for a moment have put Pauline before his little Ethel.

CHAPTER XIII.

ETHEL was certainly very courageous. She was also strong, young and healthy, and had an unusual amount of self-pride, all of which kept her from giving way under the load of grief that came upon her after Jack’s faithless behavior. But she felt her sorrow none the less deeply because she held it resolutely in check, and hid it from her father’s sight.

Just now her life looked very gray, for Capt. Pelling had been compelled, sorely against his will, to pay a long-promised visit to an old friend; and Ethel was surprised to find how much she missed him. His unobtrusive kindness and bright good nature had often driven away the memory of Jack’s cruelty; and, without making it a personal matter, he had managed to give a new turn to her thoughts by claiming her interest in the much-talked-of work on Central Africa.

Now there were no morning calls from him, no evening visits to the Wigwam, no business interviews with the publishers—in which her opinion was asked and deferred to in the matter of illustrations—to take her thoughts away from the one all-engrossing subject, and she began to think life was a huge mistake, and to wish herself well out of it, arguing foolishly that, because the clouds were dark and heavy above her just now, the future had no bright sunshine in store.

Capt. Pelling had been away nearly a week, and Ethel was feeling the daily monotony of her life very irksome as she once more set about making her father's coffee—a task she dared not trust to another.

There were letters on the table, but she did not feel particularly curious about them. She saw two thick, square, yellow envelopes, and concluded that they contained cards of invitation to some art conversazione. This was a form of amusement she did not care for; but her father enjoyed meeting people whose tastes corresponded with his own, and therefore they nearly always accepted such invitations. As she placed the coffee-pot on the table, the writing on the envelope next to her own plate caught her eyes. The blood rushed to her face, and, with nervous haste, she picked up the envelope and opened it. She read the invitation card, and the flush—was it of hope?—faded slowly, leaving an expression of sorrowful contempt on her face.

“Poor Jack!” she sighed. “I wonder if he thinks a few civilities of this kind will make amends for his conduct in the past? Does he imagine he can repay me for the loss of his love by holding out the hand of friendly patronage? Can he believe it would give me pleasure to spend an evening in watching his attentions to his handsome hostess, to see his adoring eyes following her the whole night through?” She threw the card from her with an impatient sigh. “How foolish—how contemptibly foolish it is of me to care so much after all this time! Perhaps the dad would like to see his old home again; and, as it does not really matter much whether I go or not, I will do as he wishes about it.”

As she heard her father's step on the stairs, she turned as brightly as usual toward him to say “Good-morning.” Then she held his envelope behind her playfully, saying:

“A thousand guesses, and you will not guess where this letter is from, papa!”

“I shall not make one—so tell me”

“It is an invitation to Mallingford for the seventeenth of this month.”

Mr. Mallett's face darkened with a sudden dread.

“To Mallingford? From Lord Summers, is it?”

“No, from Miss Malling herself, for a ball.”

“A ball!” he repeated. “Why in the world should Miss Malling invite me to a ball?” He looked at the envelope curiously, and then said: “It is addressed to ‘G. Mallett, Esq.,’ and in Jack Dornton's writing! Oh, I begin to understand!” he went on, in a voice of genuine relief, as he took the card from the envelope. “I feared for the moment that Summers had been doing a kindness, as he calls it, and persuaded Pauline Malling to invite her poor rela-

tives to her *omnium gatherum*. But this civility is evidently due to Dornton's good nature, and is sent in all good faith to 'the Malletts, old friends of mine,' as he would say in describing us."

"Who is Summers, papa?"

"Lord Summers is your cousin's guardian."

"Of course—I remember—the kind-looking old man we met at the Exhibition last May."

"Yes. I've been in constant dread ever since that unfortunate meeting that he would seek me out and try to do something for me. That was why I was so annoyed when you told him you copied in the galleries; I thought he might pounce on you and worm our address out of you."

"He would hardly do that, papa, if he knew you did not wish him to know it."

"My dear, you don't know Summers. He has the reputation for being a kindly old imbecile, and, under cover of his supposed kindness and imbecility, thinks himself privileged to take unpardonable liberties with everybody."

"Do you think he would tell Miss Malling about my copying at the galleries, papa?"

Ethel put the question with a sudden interest.

"No doubt of it; he is an inveterate talker."

Ethel had a sudden conviction that Miss Malling had used this information to obtain their address, if Lord Summers had not, and believed she had at last found out to whom she was indebted for her anonymous letter. This belief did not increase her desire to go to Mallingford; but she held to her resolution to leave the decision in her father's hands.

"Do you think Lord Summers knows that you get your living by giving drawing-lessons?"

Mr. Mallett flinched at the question. His old pride of birth and position still clung to him; but he had a still nobler pride.

"If he troubles to think about me at all," he answered—"and most likely he does—he would guess that I did something of the sort, for he always encouraged my daubing in the old days, and he used to say that, if I had been a poor man, I should have been a good artist."

It was so seldom that Mr. Mallett touched on the past, and Ethel was so anxious to know something of it, that she now tried to continue the discussion.

"I should think you were proud not to have to go to your brother for help, papa."

His brow contracted, and his lips tightened.

"Go to Paul for help! I would have let you and your mother die of slow starvation before I would have gone through such a useless degradation! He would not have given me a crumb from the servants' table!"

"What a terrible disposition! I'm glad you're not like your brother, dad."

"Well, I think I am in some things. The difference is that I am not so quick to take offense. Let me once feel that I am really wronged, and I am as unforgiving as he was."

"I don't quite believe that."

"Because you've never seen me really annoyed. But now about this invitation. Do you want to go to the ball?"

"I don't care one bit about it, if you don't want to go, dad."

"I don't care about the ball either; but I should like you to see the old place, Ethel. If we were to go to the ball, I should most likely run up against some one who would remember me as Geoffrey Malling, and there would be quite a little sensation over my reappearance; but this invitation entitles us to call on Miss Malling, in any case. Send an acceptance, my dear; we can follow it up by an excuse on the morning of the seventeenth. In the meantime we will run down one day and leave our cards, and take a look round just as ordinary strangers would—and no one will think we are anything else."

"Very well, dad. Aren't you going to read your other letter?"

Ethel was glad the question was settled in this way, for she, too, wished to see the old house that should in justice have been her father's. Mr. Mallett opened the other letter and threw it across to her.

"Read it out, Ethel. It's from Pelling. I've talked so much that I've no time to eat."

Ethel read the letter, which ran as follows:

"MY DEAR MALLET,—I send some birds by to-night's train—hope they will arrive all right. I am tired of this place, but can't get away under the promised fortnight. My old friend has taken a wife since I last saw him. Said wife has three sisters at present staying with her; and, as they are all of the genus 'blue-stocking,' my life has been a burden to me since my arrival here, by reason of their persevering pursuit of knowledge—African knowledge in particular."

"Pursuit of Pelling's three thousand a year would be nearer the truth," murmured Mr. Mallett, *sotto voce*.

"Sport is excellent," Ethel continued, reading, "but just the least bit monotonous. The house is full of pleasant people—and yet I miss your society more than I could have thought possible; and I am really anxious to get back to our work. Tell Miss Malling not to forget her promise—"

"What promise was that?" Mr. Mallett asked, with his mouth full.

"I'm not quite sure what he means, unless—" Ethel blushed slightly.

"Never mind; finish the letter to yourself, my dear, for I must be off directly."

After seeing her father off and finishing the letter, Ethel did not feel altogether happy. She was afraid Capt. Pelling had set too high a value on her words, and she tried to recall exactly what she had said when he had called to say good-by. What had really occurred was this. When Ethel put her hand into Pelling's, he held it while he said:

"I wish I could flatter myself by believing you would miss me a

little while I am away, Miss Mallett; but perhaps it would be a welcome miss, for I know I'm a terrible bore sometimes."

He looked so wistful that Ethel felt quite a thrill of sympathy for him, and, on the impulse of the moment, responded:

"I'm sure I shall miss you, and I shall be glad to see you back again."

And Pelling had left her with a face so glorified with delight that she had feared and wondered continually what such glorification might mean, and had alternately blamed herself for her impulsive words, and him for his misinterpretation of them.

Pauline was rather staggered a couple of days later when she received affirmative replies from Mr. and Miss Mallett; but she was in such a whirl of excitement by this time that so small a peril as a visit from her uncle and cousin passed by unheeded.

The advertisement had now been repeated three times in the "Times." The last insertion contained an offer of twenty pounds for the present address of "Sir G. M., late of Mallingford." In her dread of losing Jack, Pauline took this to mean that the advertiser had heard of her approaching marriage, and had offered this reward in order to bring matters to a crisis in time to prevent it.

Since her interview with Jack on the night of her return from town, he had been more tender in his manner toward her: his quiet, gentle thoughtfulness had been so much fuel to the flame of her passionate love; she realized that to lose him now would make the rest of her life a blank, and she fought desperately against the fate that seemed to threaten her.

Babette went up to town as arranged, to see Daws & Raven, and came back arching her brows, shrugging her shoulders, and gesticulating freely. All Pauline could get from her was that all lawyers were "beasts," and she would not go to be so insulted again for a hundred pounds.

Miss Malling took courage from the fact that her uncle had not yet seen the advertisement, arguing that, if he had not seen it on the first two days of its insertion, the chances were that he did not read the "Times," and might therefore never see it at all.

But, on the other hand, she gauged the determination of her unknown enemy by this offer of twenty pounds for her uncle's address; and her heart sunk as she weighed the chances for and against Sir Geoffrey's being brought into contact with this person, who she felt sure held information that would deprive her of position, wealth, and lover at one blow.

It was now the eighth of September, and she was to be married on the eighteenth. Babette was the only member of the household who had been taken into her mistress' confidence with regard to her approaching marriage, and the vivacious Frenchwoman was delighted at the prospect of going up to town every day between then and the eighteenth, to see after the piles of new finery indispensable at such a time.

CHAPTER XIV.

BABETTE sat opposite to Mr. Daws in the grimy, dust eaten den that he dignified by the title of "office." She was in a violent rage. Her eyes flashed, and every now and again her clinched hand came down with a thud on the table to give point to her already emphatic speech.

"It is now six days that the advertisement has been in your newspaper, and you tell me you have had no answer of any sort in all that time but madame herself? Then I tell you I do not believe you. You have not told me the truth. It is a conspiracy between you and that other little horror of a Raven to keep the affair in your own hands and to do me out of my part. I believe that you have already seen this Sir Geoffrey, and that you have sent him off on a wild-goose chase to search all the grave-yards of Spain for the tomb of his niece. For this one time you have been too clever. When I showed you the picture of Pauline Mallings's tomb, I did not tell you that, before showing it to you, I had removed the name of the town where it was taken and of the artist who took it. I have the names carefully copied, and I keep them to myself until I can show them to Sir Geoffrey personally. I will not trust my best cards in the hands of such a cheat as you, Monsieur Daws!"

The clinched hand came down with the word "cheat," and she leaned a little forward, glaring at the small, dirty man who sat curled up in a large arm-chair on the other side of the table.

He listened without moving a muscle. When she paused he smiled a slow smile of gratification.

"You are about the first client I've ever had do me justice, and I respect your shrewdness. What a pity such a head-piece was given to a woman! But you are wrong all the same about our having found Sir Geoffrey. Why don't you carry the thing through yourself? You have the address of the photographer who took that touching little picture of a grave, you say? Well, then, what is more easy than to employ a detective to run over to the place, and gather on the spot from eye-witnesses the particulars of Pauline Mallings's death, and also procure the certificate of death? This young woman retires gracefully, and Sir Geoffrey Mallings walks into his own."

"But if we could not find him?"

"Bosh! The whole of England will ring with the story. He must hear of it if he's alive."

"What would it cost to send a detective, as you say?"

"Well, you would have to put a fifty-pound note in his hand to start with. He would have to pay his way handsomely to get the information wanted."

"I have no such money in England; I should have to send to France for it. It would take four or five days to get it here, and then it would be too late for one part of my plan. Will you lend me the money?"

"I lend you fifty pounds! You must be mad! I have already

granted you five long interviews without charging you a farthing—the first time in my life I ever did such a thing. I give you my advice gratis, in consideration of possible profit in the future; but money is another thing. If we could find Sir Geoffrey I might advance the money to him; but, until we are sure he is alive and willing to go into the business with us, ‘caution’ is the word, so far as Daws & Raven are concerned.”

Babette bit viciously at her lip, and Daws watched her curiously.

“Will you tell me why you are so anxious to hurry the thing on?” he asked, presently. “We can always pop on her when we are prepared with our facts. Why not send for the money from France, and wait quietly until your agent returns from Spain loaded with proofs of the imposture? You have the game in your own hand; you can afford to wait.”

“And let her marry Monsieur Dornton?”

“Why not? Are you sweet on him yourself?”

She laughed a shrill laugh of contempt.

“But you are stupid!” she said, scornfully. Then her voice altered to a low hiss, and her face clouded over with hate as she went on: “I will tell you why I wish to stop this marriage—because she—this impostor—loves that young Dornton, loves him better than her own life, better than her position, her riches, everything; because the loss of all the rest would be as nothing to her so long as she could have him for her husband; and because my heart hungers to take from her everything she holds dear. It would be only half a job to take away her possessions; I must rob her of all that makes her life worth living, and then I can die content! For I hate her—hate her—hate her!”

“By Jehoshaphat!” muttered Daws to himself. “And when does this marriage take place?” he asked, aloud.

The question recalled Babette to herself, and she came back unwilling, it seemed, from the contemplation of her revenge.

“Ah, that is it!” she cried—“that is my despair, my anguish, my misery! The marriage takes place on the eighteenth, and it is already the thirteenth! But five days more and she will be his wife, and half my revenge will be impossible. I long to make her suffer so much that I swear to you, if my death would prevent the wedding—if I could be sure of it—I would gladly kill myself as I sit here!”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to give up that part of your plan, and be satisfied with dragging her from her position. Unless Sir Geoffrey turns up to-day, or to-morrow at the latest, we could not get the information we want in time to stop the marriage. I’m sorry to disappoint you; but I think the wedding will have to take place in spite of you, ma’m’selle.”

Babette looked worn and fagged when she reached Mallington about three o’clock. She walked listlessly across the platform to the conveyance in waiting for her—for it was a good five-mile walk from the nearest station to the park—when, just as she was mounting to her seat by the side of the groom, after placing the parcel of costly lace—the object of her journey—in safety, she heard some one behind her asking for a fly to go to Mallington Park.

She turned to look at the inquirer, and for a moment she stood

staring at a tall, well-bred looking man, evidently on the wrong side of fifty, with a sweet-faced girl of eighteen on his arm. She recognized the girl as the young lady she had followed from the Museum to her home, and whose name she had discovered from the neighboring tradespeople by her mistress' orders about two months before. Then she remembered posting a letter to this young lady for her mistress, and next she recalled having seen Dornton's letter to the same person a few days later, and, in a blind fashion, without knowing why, she connected their appearance at Mallingsford with those letters, and a wild hope sprung up in her heart that this elderly aristocrat and his pretty daughter had come to Mallingsford to help on her purpose of preventing Miss Mallings' marriage.

Babette was soon deposited at Mallingsford House. She made herself presentable, and went down to Miss Mallings' *boudoir* on the ground floor, on the pretense of discussing her morning's purchases with her mistress, but really with the determination to hang about the neighborhood of the reception-rooms, and witness—if possible, overhear—the interview between Miss Mallings and these Malletts.

The windows of the *boudoir* overlooked a long stretch of the principal drive. When Babette reached the room it was empty. She placed herself to watch for the arrival of the fly from the village. She saw it come up the long avenue and stop at the main entrance. Then she went to the hall and busied herself looking for an imaginary missing shawl among the numberless wraps lying about. The hall-porter, for some unknown reason, was not at his post, and an inexperienced footman informed Mr. Mallett that Miss Mallings was not at home.

Babette, thinking she saw the chance of help from these people gradually slipping away, came forward boldly.

"Are you sure you are right in denying Miss Mallings to this gentleman, Philip?" she asked, in a low voice. "I think you have made a mistake."

The young man bowed to the superior authority of Miss Mallings' confidential maid, and then left the matter in her hands. Babette turned to Mr. Mallett.

"If you will follow me, monsieur, I will see if Miss Mallings has returned from her drive."

She took them to the *boudoir*, stood for a moment in thought, and then flew off to the picture-gallery. As she expected, she found Jack and Miss Mallings in the deep recess of a window at the far end. She announced:

"Mr. and Miss Mallett in your *boudoir*, mademoiselle!"

Pauline sprung from her chair and stood glaring at Babette as if she were a messenger from other world. The words "Sir Geoffrey" rose to her lips; but she remembered in time that his individuality was not known to any one but herself, and she checked the name with an effort.

"I am not at home," she told her maid. "I left word to that effect."

"Yes, so they said, mademoiselle; but I happened to be in the hall, and I thought I heard the gentleman ask for Monsieur Dornton; so I offered to see if he was in."

Every nerve in Pauline's body was vibrating and a sense of suffo-

cation came over her. Had this man at last seen the advertisement or been told of it? Perhaps, too, he had been to those dreadful people Daws & Raven, and obtained from them the information that would ruin her. She turned to Jack eagerly.

"Don't see them, Jack!" she said pleadingly. "They will keep you all the afternoon, and we are so comfortable."

Jack felt that his position was hardly pleasant. If they had asked for him he ought to go to them. But still he admitted that Pauline's objection was quite natural. He could understand her wish that he should not meet Ethel more than was necessary.

"Very well," he acquiesced. "Not at home, Babette."

The Frenchwoman retraced her steps down the long gallery, with a look of deep disappointment on her face. She had expected so much from the appearance of these people. She had built on the abrupt termination of this hateful engagement through them, and now the chance was lost, utterly lost, just because she could not bring about the desired interview.

This disappointment, coming after her morning's failure at Daws' office, broke down her spirit altogether, and for the first time she began to believe that she must resign herself to the inevitable—that the marriage could not be prevented, and she must be satisfied with the poor revenge of depriving Pauline of her unlawful possessions.

She clinched her teeth with defeated rage as she entered the *boudoir*.

"No, madame has not yet returned," she said, and held the door for them to pass out into the gallery.

But in that moment of her utter despair the tide turned and carried her on to speedy victory. She preceded Mr. and Miss Mallett until they reached the central hall, and then handed them over to the footman. She stood watching them as they re-entered the hired carriage. As they drove off some one plucked at her from behind. She turned round in surprise to meet Mrs. Perkins, whom she had passed in the corridor, outside the *boudoir*, superintending the arranging of fresh flowers in the window-stand. The housekeeper's usually florid face was quite pale, and she jerked out her words in a curious, breathless way:

"Who are those people you have just shown out?"

"Mr. and Miss Mallett."

"They are nothing of the kind! The gentleman is Sir Geoffrey Malling, Baronet, brother to Sir Paul and uncle to our present mistress, and the young lady is like enough to the family to be his daughter."

"*Mon Dieu!* But are you certain?"

"As certain as that I am Caroline Perkins."

The Frenchwoman stood looking at her with a gigantic triumph in her face as she muttered:

"At last—at last!"

CHAPTER XV.

"WILL Mr. Mallett call on Messrs. Daws & Raven, at their offices, 16 Leman Street, E. C., between two and three o'clock to-day? They have private information of the greatest value to impart to him."

Ethel leaned over her father's shoulder and read the telegram.

"What can it mean, papa? It's very mysterious. Shall you go?"

"I think so. I can do no harm by going, if I do no good."

"I wish you would take me with you. I shall be in such a state of excitement until you come back."

"I could not think of taking you to a place I know nothing of, my dear. It might be inconvenient to have you with me."

"Of course! I was only joking, dear."

Mr. Mallett turned the telegram and the envelope over and over; but there was no further information of any sort to be gained from them.

Ethel looked across at him in surprise.

"Why, papa, I believe you are excited and curious! It is the first time I ever saw you so interested."

"Yes, I am curious. It strikes me as odd that, after living an uneventful life for the last twenty years, I should one day break my vow as to never revisiting Mallingford Park unless as its owner, and the next day receive this curious message. I dare say it is only a coincidence; but still it is strange, and I can't help connecting the one event with the other."

Mr. Mallett's pupils were more than once surprised during that morning by a joke from their drawing-master. The usually impassive, methodical teacher of tone and perspective, whose remarks had never strayed for one moment from the purpose of his visits within the recollection of his oldest pupil, entered the room to-day with a smile, enlivened the usually silent lesson with amusing criticisms on the students' efforts, and left with a frivolous remark that set the whole class in a roar. And Mr. Mallett walked off to his next lesson with a more erect carriage and a firmer tread than had been habitual to him for ten years past.

Again and again he had chidden himself for the strange elation that had taken possession of him. Again and again he tried to reason himself out of the childish belief that some great good fortune was coming upon him. The belief had fixed itself in his mind, and not all the calm reasoning in the world would displace it.

Surely there was some strangely exhilarating quality in the atmosphere this morning, for Ethel too went about her business in a brisker manner than she had lately. Her nerves were a little bit unstrung too, for, when about three o'clock there came a very decided rat-a-tat-tat at the door, she was worked up to such a state of extreme expectation that she almost shrieked aloud. She ran to her

usual post of observation, the stair-head, and was surprised, pleased, sorry, disturbed, all in a moment, at the sight of Captain Pelling.

In the engrossing excitement caused by the morning's telegram they had quite forgotten he was to return to-day.

"If Miss Mallett is engaged, I will not come up, as Mr. Mallett is not in. Will you let her know I'm here, and say I will not intrude if she is busy?" he was saying as she leaned over the baluster.

There was something in his speech which struck Ethel as unusual—want of confidence, an irresolution very unlike his general hearty, straightforward style. She wondered what it could mean, and a feeling of shyness as to meeting him came over her. She was almost tempted to send him a message to the effect that she could not see him just then; but she had a horror of deception, and indeed she was really glad to see him again.

A few seconds later she was shaking hands with him, and her shyness had completely vanished. He looked at her attentively, and then remarked:

"How well you look!"

"Your tone almost implies that you are more surprised than pleased," Ethel laughed.

He looked rather disturbed at such a construction being placed upon his words.

"Indeed no; I am really glad to see you so improved. But I thought perhaps you had felt the relief of my absence, that that was the reason of the change, and the thought was not flattering to my self-love."

Ethel had reasons for not wishing him to know how she had missed him, for she feared he might put a higher value on the fact than it was worth, so she carefully avoided making the answer he wished.

"You too have not suffered," she said, lightly. "You look better for your change."

"That must be fancy on your part, Miss Mallett, because I always look well. I have not really had a very good time of it."

"I am sorry! How was it? Wasn't the sport good?"

"Excellent!"

Some instinct warned Ethel not to inquire further why his visit had not been a pleasant one. Things did not seem quite as they were before he went away, and she felt nervous and uncomfortable. She knew that Captain Pelling would ask her to be his wife if he thought she would accept him. She knew also that she would never love again as she had loved Jack, and she knew her father would be delighted if she could like this man enough to marry him. But she was perplexed as to what course she ought to pursue, and, being undecided, she made every effort to put off the decisive moment.

After the question as to sport, there was an awkward little pause, and Ethel felt her heart quicken with dread. Shaking herself free from this feeling, she turned to her visitor.

"You have not asked why papa is not at home," she remarked, with a determination to avoid personal topics.

"To be sure! It is Saturday! I had forgotten! And why is he not at home?"

"I will show you why;" and she fetched the telegram and gave it to him.

"How mysterious! Quite like an event in a novel! Has Mr. Mallett any idea as to what it means?"

"Not a bit! I'm expecting him home soon; and then we shall hear all about it."

"In which case I had better be off. It may be private family business, you know."

"I don't think papa would mind your knowing. He looks upon you as a sincere friend."

"That is a real compliment from him."

"It is indeed. You are the only friend he has cultivated within my memory."

Poor Ethel! She had unwittingly brought down an avalanche upon herself.

"You see he has a treasure beyond price in his keeping, and he guards it jealously."

For a moment the drift of his remark did not strike her; she concluded he was alluding to the secret of her father's birth, which she had thought was known only to Lord Summers. She was surprised that he should know the secret; but she said nothing, and quietly awaited an explanation.

Pelling was slightly disconcerted by her unexpected silence and her inquiring gaze. He felt that he had committed himself in some way, and honestly regretted that he had been so indiscreet. He smoothed out every finger of the glove he held, devoting much attention to the task of removing the creases from the extreme tips. That done, he looked up again, and met her eyes still questioning him; and, though he would have done much to put off the question that might end their friendship, he felt that he had gone too far to recede, and therefore went on recklessly.

"Mr. Mallett is well aware that, if a man meets you often, he must learn to love you."

He stopped abruptly after this, and noticed the quick flush that overspread her face; then, impelled by an irresistible impulse, he continued:

"I know I ought not to say this to you without first speaking to Mr. Mallett; but he has been so kind to me that I have allowed myself to hope he would not object to me as a son-in-law, beyond the one great objection that applies to every one—I should rob him of you. Yet I would not even do that entirely. He should have his own rooms in our home, and he could be with us as often and as long as he liked. I would make you both so happy, if you would let me. I would cherish you so tenderly and take such care of you that an anxious thought should never come near you, and the trouble in your face which I can not help seeing sometimes should die from sheer inanition."

He paused, whilst Ethel sat quite still, her hands pressed closely together in her lap, the flush still burning in her cheek. He yearned to take her into his arms and hold her there; but, reading distress in her burning cheeks and averted eyes, he determined not to press for an answer to-day.

"I'm afraid I've worried and distressed you. I'm very sorry.

I won't trouble about it any more just now. Try to think the best you can of what I have said, and let us go on for a time as we have been, good friends." He rose from his seat, and held out his hand to her.

Ethel was touched more than she thought was possible by the unselfishness of his words. He had made no allusion to his own feelings or sufferings, yet she knew the suspense he would undergo if matters were left as they stood then. She resolved to tell him everything, and let him decide.

"Don't go for a few minutes, please," she besought him, nervously. "I have something I ought to tell you."

"Don't tell me anything, if the telling of it will cause you pain," he said, eagerly.

"It won't worry me so much to tell you as to have you not know it," she responded, with a quick, grateful glance.

He sat opposite to her, and patiently, yet anxiously, awaited her words.

"I have loved some one else very dearly," she said, slowly and earnestly, at the same time watching the effect of her words.

He looked gravely and pityingly at the pretty, flushed face; but there were no signs of surprise as he answered:

"I guessed as much."

"You—guessed?"—with a look of surprise.

"Yes; you must forgive me for having played the spy; but I loved you so dearly from the first moment I saw you that I could not help watching you, and I found it out."

"And still you wish to—"

"Make you my wife?" he finished, eagerly. "Most emphatically—yes!"

"Ah, but you don't know—"

"I know that whoever is to blame for the breaking off of this previous engagement, it is not you; and, in spite of the fact of your having promised in the past to be the wife of another, I am longing to hear you repeat that promise to me. If you can bring yourself to do it, I will try my best to deserve my great happiness by my devotion to you."

Again the thought rose in Ethel's heart, "If I had only known this man before I knew Jack!" All she could find to say was:

"How good you are!"

"Nay, I am afraid there is no great goodness in me; but I would try to be all goodness to you. Will you let me try?"

Ethel was anxious to impress upon him that there still lingered a regret in her heart for the past; but she knew not how to convey her thoughts. She felt that it would not be honest to accept him without telling him exactly how little she had to give in return for his great love.

"May I try?" he asked again.

Should she confess that she still suffered from the pangs of slighted love? There was a short struggle in her mind between pride and honesty. The latter prevailed, and she rose from her seat, and crossed to the fire-place. She held the mantel-board firmly by one hand, and then, regarding him steadily, she said, without a pause or tremor:

"You do not understand what it is I want you to know. It is only very lately that my engagement with some one else was broken off—so lately, indeed, that I have not yet recovered from it. I wish you to bear this in mind—that I am still sorry about it. At the same time I know you have done me a great honor, for I think you are true and honorable, and I believe that if I had time to leave this sad memory behind me, I could honestly accept you, and bring not only my gratitude, but my love to our home; as things are just now I feel it would not be right to say simply I would be your wife without letting you know how it is with me."

Poor Ethel! Her heart was laid bare now, and she trembled violently. Pelling came over to her and warmly took both her hands in his.

"My pearl among women!" he exclaimed. "My pure, truthful little love!"

Her hands trembled in his firm clasp, as he led her to her father's arm-chair and went down upon his knees, still holding her hands tightly.

"Now listen to me, my darling, and, when I say anything of which you disapprove, stop me. I shall see your father and explain everything to him; I shall claim the privilege of doing what I can to make your life a little brighter and pleasanter in the present. I shall not talk of love to you in any way; but I shall let you see a good deal of me in one shape or another. I will give you plenty of time to get over your present sorrow, and I shall not look upon you as my affianced in the meantime; but one day, a few months hence, I shall come again and ask the same question that I have asked to-day, and you shall answer me as truthfully as you have done to-day, and then the matter shall be settled one way or the other. Should you find that you can not think of me in any warmer way than as a friend, I shall pack up my traps and be off on another wild-goose expedition, and relieve you permanently of my presence. Is there anything you object to in that programme?"

"Nothing, except that you give everything on the chance only of a return."

"I am content to risk that; I would risk my life to make sure of it; so a few months spent pleasantly and profitably will not be a very great sacrifice. I am going now." He looked at her with something in his eyes she did not understand, and though he said he was going, he made no move from his place on the rug; then he went on, "When I leave this room, you will say good-by to Alec Pelling the lover, for some months, and to-morrow, when you come with Mr. Mallett to the Wigwam, you will meet Alec Pelling the friend only." He stopped again for a moment, as if he feared to say what was in his heart; then he added, "As it is to be a long farewell, may I ask one favor—that you will sweeten my life by a kiss from your lips?"

Ethel, blushing, made no reply; and the captain, leaning forward, his face all aglow with feeling, kissed her with a gentle, lingering kiss.

"Heaven bless and keep you, my darling!"

With these words ringing in her ears, Ethel watched the captain as he hastened from the room.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. MALLETT, in evident impatience, walked up and down the confined space between Daws' office-table and the door. Daws had refused to say anything in the absence of the lady for whom he was acting, and whom he expected momentarily.

It was now ten minutes past three, and Mr. Mallett had been in the stuffy little den three quarters of an hour, and he was getting tired of waiting. Once more he looked at his watch and glanced at the unkempt iron-gray hair of Daws as he leaned over his writing-pad. The monotonous scratch, scratch of the pen somehow irritated him; it was annoying to see this man go on so tranquilly with his occupation while he was tormented by exciting anticipations. His impatience at last got the better of him.

"I think I must wish you good-day. Your client evidently does not mean to keep the appointment, and my time is too precious to be wasted in this way."

As he spoke, the door opened behind him; and, turning round, he saw Babette, breathless and flushed, unceremoniously enter the room. He recognized her at once as the maid he had seen at Mallington Park on the previous day, and he turned a dusky red as the thought that he had been entrapped into some backstair intrigue against his niece passed through his mind.

"*Môn Dieu!* But I am fortunate to find you here still! I feared you would depart before my arrival."

Mr. Mallett bowed slightly, and waited for her to go on.

"Ah, I see," cried the woman—"you are of the Mallington family"—he winced—"and you have amazement in your heart that I, a mean domestic, should dare to make an assignation with you! But you will have more amazement when I tell you why I do this." Then, turning to the lawyer, she asked, "You have told nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Good! I am warm with haste," she remarked, as she loosened her heavy mantle of cloth and beads. "Will monsieur not sit?"

"I should prefer not until I know what I have been brought here for."

"*Eh bien!*" She seated herself, and drew an ordinary envelope from the front of her dress. "Do you know your niece, Miss Mallington, very well?"

Mr. Mallett drew himself up proudly.

"I came here to receive information, not to answer questions. If you have brought me here thinking I should help in any scheme against my niece, you are mistaken. If you have any news to impart which concerns me, I will listen; if not, I will wish you good-afternoon."

He took his hat from the table, and turned to the door.

"But one moment! I have news to tell you—news that concerns yourself very nearly. What would you do if I were to tell you that this woman who calls herself your niece is no niece at all, that

the whole estate is of right yours, that your niece is dead and buried?"

She watched him keenly; but beyond putting his hand suddenly on the back of a chair near him, he gave no sign of surprise.

"I should say that you labored under a mistake."

"But if I tell you I can show you absolute proofs?"

The clasp of the hand on the chair tightened visibly; but he answered quietly:

"Then I should say 'Show them.'"

The little lawyer, who had remained motionless and attentive until now, moved, and Babette put out her hand toward him.

"Silence then! I am not a fool!" she exclaimed, as if in answer to his unspoken remark. "That is what I am going to do. I am going to show you something that will put you right on to the straight track leading to this woman's downfall and your restoration to what has been yours almost ever since your brother's death—Mallingford Park."

Mr. Mallett drew a deep breath, and then asked, laconically:

"And your price?"

Babette felt that here was a gleam in the eyes watching her from behind the table, and, she looked at Daws instinctively. He mistook the look to mean, "You name the price," and he said, immediately:

"One year's rent-roll."

"In other words; between eleven and twelve thousand pounds?" interrogated Mr. Mallett.

Daws nodded his head affirmatively.

"The affair, so far as I am concerned, is ended."

Babette glared for an instant at the lawyer, and muttered,

"You *cochon*—you vampire!" Then, turning to Mr. Mallett, she said, in her best manner, "He is mistaken, monsieur; the price arranged between us was five thousand pounds on the day you take possession."

"To be conferred by deed of gift conditionally beforehand," put in the lawyer.

"Very good. I accept those terms on the understanding that the lady in question is proved to be an utter stranger by blood."

"You will sign the undertaking before you see our proof," Daws said, raising the lid of his desk as he spoke, and producing a ready-prepared document.

Mr. Mallett read it in silence, and then put out his hand for a pen. Daws stopped him.

"One moment. We must have a disinterested witness to the signature, if you please. Joe Blake, come here!"

The wretched lad Blake sneaked from the outer office into the room, watched Mr. Mallett sign, put his own name to the paper, and then shuffled out again.

"Now we can proceed to business," chuckled Daws. "The next move is yours, Ma'm'selle Lestrang. It is plain to be seen that the whole thing is distasteful to Mr. Mallett. He is a man of refinement, and this companionship on an equality with people so immeasurably his inferiors grates most disagreeably on his sense of the fitness of things."

The lawyer's ill-timed attempt at a joke gave Mr. Mallett the opportunity he had been longing for, and he turned upon him almost savagely.

"Be good enough to remember that this is a business interview," he said, frigidly, "and reserve your humor for a more fitting occasion." The small, shabby creature shriveled up at once, and Mr. Mallett, with a show of surface-courtesy, turned to Babbette. "And now, madame, I think the rest of this interview can be carried on between us two; the presence of a third person is unnecessary, as I conclude the proofs spoken of by you are in your possession."

"I must speak this once; and I won't interrupt again," jerked in Daws. "I am a partner in this affair—I would not have taken it up but on that understanding—and, being a partner, I submit that you have no right to shut me out; therefore, I stay."

Mr. Mallett shrugged his shoulders with an expression of utter indifference.

Babette produced the envelope again, and took from it the small photograph of a grave, which she had found in her mistress' desk. She drew out a small magnifying glass from her pocket, and crossed the room to the dirty window.

"Come and look," she said.

Mr. Mallett did as requested, and then looked at her inquiringly.

"Do you not see the name on the tomb?" she asked, impatiently, for she was so impressed with the truth of her own belief that she was annoyed when others did not jump so readily to the same conclusion as herself.

Mr. Mallett bent down again in the doubtful light that found its way through the dust-grimed panes, and looked carefully at the photograph.

Daws and Babette stood by, anxiously awaiting his answer.

"I see the name 'Pauline' plainly, and the last letters of the second name—'l-l-i-n-g.' What then?"

"Do not you remember that your niece's name is Pauline, and can you not see that those letters which are blotted out by that mark must be the first two letters of your own name? If it were not for that blot, the name would stand 'Pauline Malling.' Can you not understand that you hold in your hand a photograph of your real niece's grave, and that this woman at Mallingford is nothing but an adventuress?"

"Great Heaven!"

He stood staring, first at one, then at the other, and then, in breathless amazement, he looked at the card in his hand.

Babette felt satisfied as to the success of her *coup*.

"And, if that is not enough—I mean the mere name—there is the date, 'May 18—.' This woman who has been quietly accepted as the late baronet's heiress first came to life in July of the same year. It is all quite plain."

In a dazed fashion Mr. Mallett passed his hand across his forehead. He could not yet realize the position in which he stood; he could not grasp what it meant for him—comfort, position, riches, splendor, after twenty years of comparative privation. His head was in a whirl.

“Will you not sit? You look overcome, Sir Geoffrey.”

He started on hearing himself addressed by his proper name. Yes, that was just what it meant to him—that he was, or would soon be, Sir Geoffrey Malling of Mallingford Park, instead of a hard-working drawing-master, doing his daily round of instruction at so many shillings a quarter, and thinking himself fortunate if, after settling his bills, he was able to put away a few pounds at the end of each term. He dropped into the chair placed for him by Babette, wondering if he should wake up to find it all a dream. He listened, without, however, gathering much of her meaning, to the Frenchwoman’s voluble explanation.

“We advertised for you day after day in the *Times*, but could get no answer; and I was in despair, when Providence sent you down to Mallingford. Mrs. Perkins saw you, and recognized you as you went out, and told me who you were. How I prayed that she was not mistaken! I telegraphed to Mr. Daws; and he telegraphed to you this morning. I made an absolute necessity of coming to town for some wedding finery; and so here we are!”

“And now what is to be done? And am I to go down to the park and turn this woman out with a policeman, or how do you propose to proceed?”

“She must not be interfered with until our proofs are all prepared,” replied Mr. Daws. “My suggestion is that Ma’m’selle Lestrang should give you the address of the man who took that photograph—which, with a rare foresight, she withheld from me; that you cross over to Paris by to-night’s boat, and from there make your way as quickly as you can to this place in Spain: that, when there, you get affidavits, or whatever their Spanish equivalent may be, from eye-witnesses of your niece’s death, also the certificate of her death, and any other evidence that may crop up, and that on your return you place said proofs in my hands; and before a month has passed you will be in possession of Mallingford, and ma’m’selle and I will be fingering that five thousand.”

“I have no money to meet the expenses of such a journey.”

“I thought of that the minute I received ma’m’selle’s telegram, and I raised fifty pounds at a big sacrifice this morning. Sign this bill for seventy-five at three months, and the fifty is yours.”

Mr. Mallett’s lip curled with contempt at the shameless extortion.

“You must feel very sure of this game,” he remarked, “to be so—generous, shall we call it?”

Daws listened to the innuendo with placid unconcern.

“Well, I do feel sure of it; and I’ll tell you why. Miss Malling called upon me on the very first day our advertisement of your address appeared, and she was in such an awful state of fright about it—for all her smooth words and soft voice—that I saw in a minute she was afraid of you for some reason or other. Putting what I observed and ma’m’selle’s theory about that photo, together, I concluded that we were on the right track—that your niece is dead—died six years ago—and this woman is nothing but an impostor.”

“Oh, yes, it is sure enough,” interposed Babette. “But let us waste no more time. I must get back to my fine madame, and you, Sir Geoffrey, will have to say good-by to the charming young lady, your daughter, and make arrangements for your absence. Here is

the address of the photographer who took the picture. That ends the arrangements so far as I am concerned at present; the rest remains with you and Monsieur Daws; he will let me know how you go on in your search. Good-afternoon!"

Daws looked after her in surprise. She had not spoken a word about the need for haste if the marriage was to be prevented; he had been expecting it all through the interview, and she had gone without once introducing the subject. Perhaps she had altered her mind; any way, that part of the business had nothing to do with him. Once more he opened his desk.

"Here is the money, Sir Geoffrey, and here is the bill ready stamped to sign. You will send me an occasional telegram, if you come across any news; and if you find another fifty necessary you can have it on the same terms. I wish you a successful search, sir, and a speedy return."

"I shall wire if necessary, not unless; and you may depend upon my earliest possible return."

He put his name to the bill, took up the small roll of notes, tested and counted them, bade the lawyer good-day, and left the room without seeing his extended hand.

"As proud as Lucifer!" muttered Daws, not a bit abashed. "Never mind—it's a case of '£ s. d.' plain and simple between us, and the plainer and simpler the better."

Mr. Mallett reached the noisy, bustling street, and looked about him for a cab; time was getting precious, if he meant to start to-night; and he would like to do so, if possible—for an intolerable restlessness had come to him, and he felt that he could not spend a moment in peace until he knew everything.

To his surprise, as he looked up and down the long street, Babette glided from the shadow of a door-way and beckoned to him.

"I want to say a dozen words to you that I do not care that little man to hear," she said, as he reached her side. "I have only two minutes to spare, and I was afraid you would not leave in time. If you find out that your niece is dead, and that this woman is an impostor soon enough to let me have a telegram to that effect by Wednesday morning, I will not ask you for my half of that five thousand pounds."

Here was another complication.

"Why by Wednesday morning?" asked Mr. Mallett, in surprise.

"Because she is going to marry Mr. Dornton at Bishopsgate Church at eleven o'clock on Wednesday next—all in secret, you know—and I would not only give up the money, but the best years of my life to prevent it!"

"Married to Dornton on Wednesday—the very day after her birthday—at a busy city church! Great heavens, what does it all mean?" asked Mr. Mallett, in perplexity.

"It means she is fond of that young man, and will marry him in spite of every one, if you do not prevent it. I must fly for my train—do what you can."

He stood for a moment looking after her retreating figure, tried to make out what the news meant, then gave it up in despair, and bestowed his thoughts exclusively on the arrangements for his absence.

CHAPTER XVII.

SUNDAY at Mallingford Park. The house was full of visitors. Small attics on the top story which had never been slept in since the great doings of thirty-nine years before, when the late Sir Paul came of age, were all occupied now, for, Lord Summers having expressed a wish that Miss Malling's majority should be marked by fitting festivities, that lady had thrown herself heartily into the project. She was so anxious to fill up every hour of the day with occupation of some kind that those who knew her best noticed with silent wonder the restless craving for excitement. True, her manner was as caressingly smooth and her voice as soft and sweet as ever; but there was a constant, insatiable desire to be doing something.

It was a close stifling day, and there were a faint, white mist on the park-lands, and an intense stillness in the air, which proved very trying to the majority of Miss Malling's guests after luncheon. They sauntered out of the reception-rooms by twos and threes, and sought the quiet of their own apartments, until the ground-floor looked quite deserted.

Pauline's health was generally good; but she too felt a breathless languor to-day, and determined to enjoy the afternoon in her own rooms. She removed the gorgeous toilet which had gladdened the eyes of the villagers in church that morning, and replaced it by a light cashmere morning-gown.

Babette was dismissed until five o'clock, and Pauline threw herself into a deep low chair by the open window and sighed wearily.

"The last Sunday that I shall be known to the world as Miss Malling," she mused. "Before this time next week Jack and I will be away—miles away—from here, happy in each other's society, and in the certainty that nothing on earth can ever separate us. Most young women would have numberless love tokens to destroy before their marriage—I have absolutely nothing that I fear my husband's seeing. Circumstances have been against my cultivating lovers as an amusement, and I am spared the farce of destroying the evidences of my past folly."

For a few moments her thoughts wandered off to the future that looked so bright to her longing eyes. Presently they went back to her previous train of ideas, and she found herself repeating mechanically, without thinking of their meaning, the words, "the evidences of my past folly." They shot through her mind again and again, and she was conscious of them even while she was picturing in glowing colors the happiness which was now almost within her grasp. She roused herself irritably; the reiteration of the phrase worried her. She put it from her resolutely; but it was of no use. The obnoxious words repeated themselves persistently—"evidences of my past folly, evidences of my past folly." She left her chair hastily and began to pace the room.

When she had taken two or three turns up and down, she stopped in front of her desk and looked at it thoughtfully.

"I suppose I may as well destroy it," she said, absently. "It can do me no good to keep it, and it might possibly do me harm in the future. That must have been in my mind all the time."

She unlocked the small bronze box on the toilet-table with a key that hung from a fine gold chain round her neck; and took from it a bunch of keys. Then, drawing up a chair to the desk, she unlocked that also, and went slowly through its contents.

She came upon one or two letters that interested her slightly and drew her thoughts away from her original purpose to search the desk, and it was not until both sides were quite empty that she discovered with a sudden heart-quickenning fear the absence of that for which she was searching.

A look of wild despair flashed from her eyes and her breath came in short sharp gasps, as she turned to the heap of odds and ends which she had already gone through, with a hope that in her absence of mind she might have passed what she sought without noticing it.

Her quick nervous fingers turned over the papers until the pile had once more been thoroughly searched; and then Pauline Malling sunk back in her chair with her hand to her head and a look of despair in her eyes. Horrible thoughts chased each other through her aching brain; and, when five o'clock at last struck, she had arrived at only one definite conclusion, that the person who had possession of the missing article and the one who had advertized for the address of Sir Geoffrey Malling were one and the same.

When she rose and relocked the desk, she was haggard and pale, and she looked at herself wistfully in the glass; and an instinctive prayer went up from her heart that her beauty might not leave her until she was Jack Dornton's wife. In the midst of all that threatened her—loss of name, wealth, position—it was almost touching to note how this worldly woman counted everything as nothing compared with her love for Jack.

Lord Summers was one of the guests at Mallingford. He was staying "over the seventeenth," and the fussy, kindly old man was slightly concerned at the existing state of affairs. He arrived only on the Saturday evening, and he was surprised to find Jack still at the Park.

He was keen in spite of his good nature, and he had seen enough in the twenty-four hours he had been there to arouse his curiosity—even his suspicions. He took an opportunity after dinner to sound Jack.

"And when are my pictures to be completed, Mr. Dornton?" he asked, after beckoning to Jack to bring his chair next to his own, as soon as the ladies had left the room.

This very question had been a point of disagreement between Jack and Pauline. He had wished to carry out the commission for those six pictures, and she had urged the unfitness of his earning another penny by his painting after their marriage. So he hesitated a little before he answered.

"Are you anxious to have them soon? I am anticipating a winter in Rome this year, and I should like, if possible, to devote myself while there to a close study of the old masters. But, if you are par-

ticular as to time, I will finish your commission before I touch any other work, of course."

"No, I don't think I am exactly in a hurry, if you are not," and as his lordship spoke he thought of the avidity with which Jack had accepted the offer when it was originally made, and his voluntary promise to complete the series by the end of the year. "So you mean to winter in Rome?" he said, pleasantly. His lordship was busy with the skin of a filbert; and he raised his eyes and looked straight into Jack's as he asked, "And how does Miss Ethel Mallett like the prospect of so long a separation?"

Jack reddened suddenly, and he hated himself for it.

"I did not know you took enough interest in my private affairs to be led into investigating them," he answered, with a decided touch of displeasure in his voice.

"Nor do I. You are mistaken; it is Miss Mallett's affairs I am interested in. I beg you will not credit me with prying into your personal affairs at all. As I have spoken on the matter, and as you seem to resent the liberty—which, believe me, was not intended as such—I must explain how things are. I met an old friend of mine, with his daughter, at the Exhibition of the Royal Academy one day last season. I had known him in years past as an enthusiast in art, and I was delighted to meet so congenial a companion." Lord Summers paused a moment, and looked carefully round the table; seeing everybody occupied in conversation, he went on, in a slightly lowered voice, "My friend has had many reverses in life, which have necessitated his taking the name of 'Mr. Mallett,' and have driven him to earn a living for himself and his family by giving lessons in drawing. I see you begin to understand now"—in answer to Jack's start of surprise. "Well, we went through some of the rooms together and we came to a picture of yours. Miss Mallett's delight at its position on the line was eloquent of many things. I looked the question I did not care to ask, and Mr. Mallett told me of the engagement between his daughter and you, and expressed his wish that she should remain in the same class of society that she had been brought up in, in answer to my suggestion that she should come to us for a season in town. Now, perhaps, you will understand my motive in seeking you out and excuse my seemingly impertinent curiosity."

Jack's feelings at that moment were not enviable. He had always looked upon Lord Summers' commission as a direct proof of his own ability. It was a decided damper to his good opinion of himself to discover that it was due to his patron's interest in Ethel Mallett; and he felt more uncomfortable still as he recalled the manner in which he had repaid that interest. Still he would not beat about the bush.

"As you do not seem to have been very glad to hear of the engagement, perhaps you will be better pleased to hear that it is at an end."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and I think you should know that Miss Mallett took the initiative in the breaking off."

"I am surprised! I thought she was very fond of you. But there is no accounting for women's actions."

And then Lord Summers turned to his other neighbor and threw himself into a discussion upon the drainage of land, thus tacitly dismissing the other subject; but Jack was conscious that he was not held blameless in the matter—nor indeed did he feel so."

One point in the conversation had roused his curiosity—Lord Summers' remark as to the name of "Mallett" being assumed. He would have liked to pursue the subject; but as things were, he had no right to feel curious.

Later in the evening Miss Malling and her guardian were chatting confidentially, and the subject of the mysterious advertisement was introduced.

"Have you any notion what they could mean?" he asked.

"Not the smallest," she answered. "It is curious Sir Geoffrey never saw them."

"But he may have, without our knowing it."

"True. But don't you think that the motive, whatever it was, must have affected the whole family, and that, if he had been found, we should have been mixed up in it?"

"Possibly, but not necessarily. If I had known where Geoffrey was, I should certainly have insisted upon his sifting the matter. Indeed, at one time I thought of investigating it myself; but your uncle was always so touchy about any one's interfering in his affairs that I thought it better to let it alone."

For a moment there was a fixed look of fear on Pauline's face; but Lord Summers was too much taken up with his subject to notice it.

"Good-looking fellow, Dornton," he remarked, carelessly, with a glance to where Jack was carrying on the usual war of words with Bertha Collins.

"Very," Pauline answered, shortly.

"Made quite a long stay with you. Been here since the beginning of July, has he not?"

"I forget exactly when he came."

"If one of our own people were to make such an unusually long stay, folk would think you had made up your mind at last. As it is—" His lordship shrugged his shoulders, but did not finish his sentence.

"Exactly," said Pauline, with sweet indifference.

But, in spite of this apparent indifference, Lord Summers felt satisfied that things were in an unsatisfactory state, and he wished fervently that, in his anxiety to benefit the future husband of his old friend's daughter, he had been prompted to do anything rather than send him down to this particular neighborhood.

Sunday evening was rather a quiet time at Mallington, and the house was wrapped in darkness earlier than usual. But the lamps in Miss Malling's *boudoir* burned on steadily, for Jack and his *fiancée* were having their last confidential chat before their marriage. The next morning Jack was to leave for London, to obtain the special license and see after sundry small matters, and he would not return until late on Tuesday afternoon.

"I suppose we must say good-by to-night, as I shall most likely start before you are down?" Jack said.

"Yes—but not just yet! Don't be in a hurry to leave me, Jack,"

Pauline answered, with a touch of pleading in her voice. She knelt on the thick white rug at his feet, and added, "I would get up to give you a parting salute if I were not afraid that Lord Summers would hear of it."

"My dear, there is no need," Jack said, calmly. "At the same time, I can't understand your dread of Summers. Surely you may do as you choose in so small a matter?"

"I don't think I understand it myself, Jack; yet I feel it. My life is full of dread just now;" and she gave a startled look at the windows as a sudden gust of wind rattled them.

"You are nervous, Pauline," Jack said. "I thought you were above such a womanish ailment as 'nerves.'"

Pauline put up her hand to enforce silence, and a strange look crept into her eyes. The breathless stillness of the day was giving way to a spiteful little hurricane, which was shrieking round the corners of the house, and rattling at the fastenings of doors and windows, whirling the already numerous dead leaves against the glass, and making itself generally unpleasant. But, beyond the noises caused by the wind, the house was as still and silent as the tomb. The last of the visitors had retired to their rooms nearly an hour before, and probably there was not a waking soul in the house except those two, and poor tired Babette, who sat by the fire in her mistress' dressing-room above, pondering the chances in favor of and against Sir Geoffrey's finding the proofs of the real Pauline Mallings' death in time to stop this woman's marriage.

Pauline listened intently; but the house itself was silent enough to satisfy even her strained hearing.

"What did you think you heard?" Jack asked, in a whisper, impressed, in spite of himself, by her manner.

"A clashing like the crossing of swords," she answered, in a dull, apathetic voice.

"The rattling of the fastenings to the doors," Jack cried, laughingly. "I thought by your frightened look you had discovered a family ghost."

"But it was outside this door, Jack—in the corridor."

Jack looked at her curiously.

"What should put such a strange notion into your head," he asked, "when the dropping of a saucepan or an iron window-bar falling would make just the same noise?"

"Our family legend, I suppose," she replied, in the same absent way.

"What is the legend?"

Pauline had determined that Jack should not hear that unhappy story until he was her husband; but to-night, when he asked her the direct question, "What is the legend?" she forgot her previous determination; or perhaps she was prompted by the superstitious fancy that possessed her to divide the burden of her ghostly knowledge; any way, whatever the cause, she gave a direct answer to Jack's question.

"The legend is that— Put your arm round me, Jack! The legend runs that in the time of the troubles between Charles I. and the Parliament there was a royalist leader hidden in the house of the Mallings—the name was spelled 'M-a-l-l-y-n-g' then. We

were noted royalists in those days, and the head of the house at that time, Master Humbert Mallyng of Mallyng House, had reduced himself to such poverty by his adherence to the king's cause that he and his family could barely keep themselves from starvation. This Humbert had been married twice. He had only one son by his first wife, a proud, haughty, reserved young man, who was about twenty-five at the time of which I am speaking, and who had an intense passion for high play. His name was Paul, and he was generally feared and disliked by all the tenantry. Besides his eldest son, Master Humbert had a numerous family of small children by his second wife, a pretty woman, many years younger than himself, who was the daughter of one of his own tenant-farmers. Of course Paul hated heartily these younger members of the family, thinking naturally that they diverted a large share of his father's rent-roll from him. Now comes the story. As I said, there was a noted royalist leader in hiding in Mallyng, and there was a very large reward offered for his betrayal. One night a body of about twenty parliament men came clattering up to the door and demanded admittance. Master Humbert, feeling quite satisfied as to the safety of the hiding-place where the royalist was, opened to them at once. Well, they searched the house from cellar to garret, and found nothing; but their information had been so precise that they were not content, and they made up their minds to stay all night and search the house again by daylight. Humbert felt a little anxious, but not really alarmed, when he heard this, for he had perfect confidence in the secret chamber, as no one but himself and his son and heir, Paul, knew even in what part of the house it was situated; so he told the parliament men they were welcome to stay, but that he could not feast them as he had barely food enough in the house for his own family. They grumbled, and fell back on the traveling rations in their pouches. Just as the house was being closed for the night, as an evil fate would have it, Paul came rattling up, gained an interview with his father, and told him he must have a very large sum of money by the next day but one to meet his gambling debts or he would be a ruined man. Poor old Humbert wrung his hands, and told him with tears in his eyes, that he had not the money wherewith to buy food for his little children; how then could Paul expect him to provide him with money for such a purpose? Then Paul suggested the betrayal of their guest, and the old man in feeble rage raised his hand and struck him. There was a terrible scene between them, and Paul left with a cruel laugh; but in the morning a messenger came from the village to the leader of the parliament men, with a piece of paper on which a plan was drawn, and the troopers went straight to the secret chamber and secured their prisoner. Of course you understand that Paul had betrayed him for the reward. The next time the son came to his home he found his father almost an imbecile, his mind shattered by horror at his son's dishonor; but, when Paul went into the room where the old man was, he sprung up, took his sword from where it hung against the wall, and, turning on his son, called on him to defend himself, for that he, Humbert Mallyng, strong of heart, though weak of arm, would by his son's death wipe out this first stain of dishonor on the family name. The old man fell on Paul

so furiously, his onslaught was so sudden, that the younger man lost his presence of mind, and, after weakly parrying two or three strokes, he fell with his father's sword through his heart."

Pauline held her breath at this point, and listened again; but, beyond the whistling of the wind and the rustle of the leaves on the terrace, all was silence. Jack shivered involuntarily, and drew her still closer to him as she went on:

"Then, when poor Master Humbert stood over his son's body and realized what he had done, his last ray of reason went from him, and he became a raving, shrieking maniac. His poor young wife locked herself up in one of the garrets with all her young children, except the eldest boy; and listened in silent horror to her husband as he went shouting, cursing, and blaspheming through the house. The servants ran away in fear of their lives, and the old man gathered all the inflammable material he could find, heaped it over his son's body, and set fire to it. Every soul of them was burned to death—nothing but bones was found in the ruins—with the exception of the eldest boy by the second wife, who saved his life by jumping from the window of his room, but broke both his legs. This boy was afterward the first baronet, and was called 'hobbled Sir Geoffrey' in consequence of his limp."

"What a chapter of horrors!" exclaimed Jack.

"Yes, it is very dreadful. And now they say that if a Malling contemplates doing anything that will bring disgrace on the name, those two again go through their ghastly fight for the honor of the house, and can be heard stamping their feet and striking their swords up and down the passages quite plainly."

"Still I don't see why you should imagine you heard them just now," Jack said quietly. "I hope you do not think you are bringing disgrace on the family name by marrying me?"

He waited a little, as if expecting an answer. There was none. He put her from him gently, and looked at her earnestly.

"Do you think your ancestors have risen from their graves to reveal their indignation at your approaching marriage with a poor painter who is a mere nobody apart from his art? Because, if you really believe that, the belief must in the first place proceed from your own ideas being identical with theirs; and in that case it is not too late even yet to draw back, you know."

As he spoke, there was a flash, almost of hope, in his eyes.

For an instant Pauline looked at him in silent agony. She had been so absorbed by her own knowledge of the portent's meaning that the view Jack might possibly take of it had never occurred to her. She threw her arms around him, clinging to him wildly, despairingly, while she begged him never, never to speak of leaving her again if he would not see her fall dead at his feet.

It was perhaps ominous that these were the last words of actual conversation that passed between them before they stood side by side at the altar.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was rather annoying to Pelling that just now, when he was anxious to make the most of his chance with Ethel, her father's

absence prevented his carrying out his design. He fretted and fumed impatiently over Mr. Mallett's letter—telling of his enforced absence for a week—when he first received it; and then, seeing the uselessness of repining, he set about making plans for relieving Ethel's loneliness.

He wrote her a letter, telling her he regretted now more than ever that he had neither mother nor sisters, nor even a stray aunt, as, if he had, he would press them into playing propriety, and carry her off a prisoner to spend the week at the Wigwam. Then he made appointments at the publisher's, always taking care to arrive before her, and generally, after putting her into a cab, returning for a last ten minutes' chat with Mr. Bramwell before starting himself. Then there was usually either a letter—on business, of course—or a novel by the morning post; and later on in the day would arrive a box of lovely loose blossoms or a basket of late grapes and peaches. So Ethel was always being pleasantly reminded that her happiness was the chief object of one person's life, and the knowledge comforted her exceedingly.

Meanwhile Mr. Mallett was having rather a hard time of it. He arrived in Paris on Sunday morning, and the wedding was to take place on the following Wednesday. This gave him but three clear days to get to the obscure Spanish town—of which he did not even know the whereabouts—hunt up the evidence of his niece's death, and telegraph the news in time to stop the ceremony.

As he thought over the business calmly, he came to the conclusion that success on this point was decidedly doubtful; but it was possible, and he determined to strain every nerve to achieve it. For, in a careless sort of way, he was partial to stupid, blundering, and weak-minded Jack, and he would be sorry to see him the victim of an unscrupulous adventuress.

After a weary two days' struggle with railway officials and timetables, he reached Madrid on Tuesday in the cool blush of the early morning, very fagged, but determined to go on. He had made a friend of the guard, glad to find some one who spoke French—for his Spanish was doubtful from long disuse—and on the arrival of the train they went off together to the inquiry-office to find out means to reach the obscure town of Villa Silentio.

The station-master, half asleep, and wholly angry at being routed out of bed at such an early hour in the morning, at first denied all knowledge of a place of that name; but, when the guard reminded him that such things as reference-books of the railway routes were issued for his especial enlightenment, his manner changed, and he proceeded to do his best on Mr. Mallett's behalf.

"It is here, you see," he said in Spanish, putting his fat finger on a spot in the map. "Señor can not leave Madrid until half past nine; he will then have two hours' railway-ride, and then an hour and a half by coach over not the very best of roads. Señor will remember to leave the train at Bassillia and inquire for the coach for Villa Silentio."

Mr. Mallett looked at his watch. It was a quarter to six; he would have time for three hours' rest. Thanking the friendly guard for his good services, he tossed his small bag and rug on the nearest hack-carriage and drove off to an hotel.

His mind was full of memories as he drove through the quiet streets. He remembered that the last time he saw Madrid he was on a sketching tour through Spain. That was in his father's lifetime, and he had good credit at the banker's. Life then appeared full of bright possibilities, and the thought of ever having to work for his living had not presented itself to him. Now how different things were with him! His thoughts were very sober ones when the lumbering conveyance drew up with a jerk at the hotel door.

It seemed to Mr. Mallett, travel-worn with his forty-eight hours' bustle and rattle, that he had not positively closed his eyes when the boots aroused him by thundering at his bedroom door.

"It is now nine. Señor has a quarter to dress in, ten minutes for his breakfast, and five minutes to catch his train."

And at one o'clock Mr. Mallett, feeling as if his senses had been shaken out of him by the last hour over that never-to-be-forgotten road, found himself standing in the market-place of Villa Silentio, with the hot midday sun beating down on him, feeling more completely alone and helpless than he ever remembered to have felt before.

"I am afraid I made a mistake in coming myself," he said to the market clock, as he stood in front of it. "You see a man of fifty-seven is not so quick and apt in adapting himself to circumstances as a younger man would be; and in the humdrum life of the last twenty years I have lost all my old *savoir-faire* that would have served me so well now."

The place looked very desolate. There was an old man in a broad-brimmed hat crossing one corner of the open square, and a half-starved-looking hen was clucking noisily to her brood of hungry chicks; but beyond these there was no sign of life that he could see. The sun lay in yellow patches on the ill-paved square, half cobbles and half-baked mud, and the ragged awnings of a few poor stalls, deserted just now, hung down as if they dared not flutter for fear of attracting attention to their dirt and poverty.

For two or three minutes Mallett stood listening to the distant rumbling of the coach-wheels, and, great as had been his suffering during the drive, he almost wished himself back again on the awful machine, instead of here in this death-like place. He wondered if he should ever be able to get away from it again? He almost thought not.

He shook off the dreamy feeling of unreality that possessed him, and crossed to a deserted-looking house on the shady side of the square, where a sign-board from which all vestige of paint had long since passed away, hung over the door, seeming to denote a house of entertainment.

He pushed open the door and it was swung to behind him without noise. He was in a large stone-flagged room which occupied the whole depth of the house, the opposite end opening on to a crazy veranda crumbling under the weight of luxuriant creepers, through which there were glimpses of a weed-grown inclosure beyond.

With all his artistic tastes, Mr. Mallett was at heart a practical Englishman, and his business instincts were offended by the apathy of the whole place, more especially by the unbusiness-like aspect of apparently the only hotel in the town. He stamped up and down

the stone floor, and shouted until the stones echoed his voice. At the end of ten minutes a sallow face, surrounded by turbulent masses of frizzy black hair leaned over the hand-rail of the stairs that led up to the next floor, and an angry voice, in a most incomprehensible *patois*, inquired what all the uproar was about. Here was a new difficulty! If Mr. Mallett could not understand them, how could he expect them to understand him?

The woman above looked at him in unmoved surprise for a moment, and then, muttering something in which he caught only the word "stranger," uttered in a tone of extreme astonishment, disappeared. Mr. Mallett, concluding that he had interrupted the *siesta*, quietly sat down to wait until she should have made herself presentable.

In about five minutes the sallow face and frizzy hair reappeared, and the woman began to apologize profusely.

Mr. Mallett stood politely silent, hat in hand, until she seemed to have ended her speech, when he presented the envelope given him by Babette, with the name and address of the photographer of the gravestone.

The talkative lady took it over to the light, and spelled it out laboriously, and then turned again to Mr. Mallett, and rattled off another little incomprehensible speech, interspersed with numberless ejaculations of astonishment. Seeing at last that he did not understand a word of what she was saying, she pointed to the address in her hand, and said slowly in Spanish:

"My father."

Mr. Mallett understood that, for pointing in his turn to the envelope, he asked:

"Where?"

She smiled pleasantly, motioned to him to reseal himself, and went upstairs looking once or twice over her shoulder to nod and smile at him reassuringly. Could it be that the man he was in search of was here in this house—that, just when he was beginning to believe he should fail, Fate had changed her mood, and was going to be kind to him?

He could hear an animated conversation going on somewhere in the rooms above, and he recognized the voice of the woman and the tones of a man; but he could gather no meaning from the rapidly flowing speech.

Presently there came down to him an elderly Spaniard, with something of the dandy still clinging to him in the shape of waxed mustaches and perfumed hair.

Still, the signs of decay that abounded throughout the place showed themselves even here in the ancient top's frayed jacket and well-worn shoes.

To Mr. Mallett's surprise and relief, he at once opened the conversation in passable French.

"Monsieur wishes to see me? He has evidently come a long way for that purpose. I am charmed, flattered, and abashed all at one time—charmed and flattered to receive any one who comes a distance to pay homage to art, and abashed to have to receive him in this manner."

An eloquent shrug and a glance at his shabby clothes emphasized his words.

"Not quite that," began Mr. Mallett; but the señor's apologies were not to be cut short.

"Pardon," he interrupted, more with the airy volubility of a Frenchman than the staid dignity of a Spaniard. "I must first explain how it is you find me thus, before my mind will know rest; it is due to myself."

"But I assure you," again began Mr. Mallett, in a last effort to check the recital of family misfortunes which his instinct told him was coming; but the old man put up his hand and proceeded:

"You know already I am Señor Castellan, an aristocrat by the accident of birth, an artist by the gift of Heaven; but you did not know that I am now a beggar by the decree of Fate. *N'importe*. I live still; and to live is in itself a greater happiness than, perhaps, one deserves. You have no doubt come here out of curiosity to see the man whose name is famous, in the French *salons*, and you marvel to find him such a one as you now see. I explain the seemingly incomprehensible thus: On my return from my art-studies in Paris to the home of my fathers, I decided to resign painting—at the best a niggardly mistress to serve—and set up my studio as a photographic artist here in this town, where such a thing as photography was unheard of. Monsieur understands the charm of novelty, so he will not be surprised to hear I made a great success. I worked all day, and at night I ate, drank and enjoyed myself. I thought I had found your goose with the golden eggs, and the future troubled me not at all; then, in an unlucky moment, was proposed the line of railway through this province. It was decided to carry it through Bassillia—but twelve miles from here—instead of through this place, which in the past owed all its prosperity to the fact of its being one of the principal posting-towns on the high-road to the North. That decision settled the future of Villa Silentio. The trade and prosperity of the place, and with it my practice as an artist in photography, dwindled year by year, until at last I gave up in despair six years ago, and came here to end my days among my daughter's children. Monsieur is a man of the world; he will see how blameless is my present poverty; fate has been too strong for me."

He put his hand on his heart, and bowed with the air of a prince. His belief that Mr. Mallett had come to visit and compliment art in his person was so evidently genuine that the sensitive gentleman felt almost unhappy to have to undeceive him; but time was pressing. He had none for the observance of unnecessary politeness.

"I have listened to you, señor; you will now give me my turn and listen to me."

He took the little photograph from his pocket-book and held it toward Castellan.

"I believe you took that picture. If you retired from business six years ago, that must have been taken during the last few months of your practice, as the date on the stone is only a few months over six years from the present time; so you will not have much trouble in recollecting all about it. Now I want you to tell me where the grave of which that is a picture is to be found, how

you came to take the photograph, whom you took it for, and any other circumstances you can remember in connection with it."

The Spaniard leaned forward with his hands on his knees to look at the photograph, but he did not attempt to touch it. He stared at it earnestly while Mr. Mallett was speaking, and, when he had finished, he looked up with a scared face as he answered:

"I said something was wrong about that affair at the time, and now my words are coming to pass. That, monsieur, is the only grave I photographed during my career, so I am not likely to forget it. I did not like the job, I can assure you: I have an antipathy to graves and coffins and all that reminds one of death, and I would not have taken that picture for untold gold, but that I was enslaved by the beauty of the lady who asked me to do it. Monsieur has not seen such another—tall, shapely, with eyes, hair and skin perfect, and her voice soft and sweet like a silver bell. She coaxed me to do it against my will, and I crept into the convent grave-yard one morning at three o'clock with my camera, before even the busy sisters were out of their cells, and took the picture for her. You may see how imperfect the picture is, how many blemishes it has, and you must not judge of my usual work by it, for my hand shook with fear—" The soul of the artist was ousting the shade of the aristocrat.

Mr. Mallett was by this time too eager to stand a second recital.

"Never mind the blemishes, Señor Castellan," he interrupted. "The photograph is good enough for my purpose. I want you now to tell me the name of the lady who gave you the order, the name of the convent where the grave is, with directions for getting there."

Castellan's hands went up in dismay.

"You can not get there! It would be sacrilege. No man is permitted to enter the gates but on two days in the week, for a couple of hours at visiting time, you understand, when the holy sisters are all shut in their cells at prayers."

"Still I must get to see that grave before sunset to-night, and I will give two hundred francs to any one who will help me."

"Two hundred francs! It is a large sum here in Villa Silentio. There is a working lay sister who does the errands for the convent ladies, with whom I am acquainted, who might be induced—" He paused thoughtfully.

"That is settled then. And now how far is it, and how are we to get there?" Mr. Mallett asked, rising briskly from his chair.

Castellan motioned him back to his seat.

"You must leave this to me entirely, monsieur. One ill-considered step might balk your plan, and rob Sister Maria and me of our reward. It must be done during vespers, if at all; and in the meantime I must see the good sister and make my plans. It is now two o'clock: at a quarter past six you must be ready to accompany me; and, if I might advise refreshment and rest before we start on our expedition, monsieur would be more fitted for it."

"One moment," said Mr. Mallett, as Castellan rose to call his daughter to their guest. "Tell me the name of the convent before you go."

"It is called the Convent of the Holy Assumption, and it is but five minutes' walk from here."

"And the name of the lady who ordered that photograph?"

"Ah, that I never knew! Sister Maria managed all the business part of the affair, as she will do now, and the lady's name was never mentioned."

The young woman, looking quite smartened, now brought in a tray with bread, eggs, fruit, and a thin long-necked bottle of golden-colored wine upon it.

Señor Castellan went through the front door into the market-place, pausing on the threshold, with his fingers on his lips, to say:

"Until six and a quarter then, *au revoir*."

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. MALLETT did not get much sleep while awaiting Señor Castellan's return. His mind was too busy digesting what he had just heard. Putting two and two together, bearing in mind the fact that the señor's description of his beautiful customer tallied exactly with that given of the so-called Pauline Mallings by Jack Dornton, and that the photograph taken by Castellan was afterward found in that lady's possession, his belief in the imposture was naturally strengthened, and his impatience to visit the grave and see for himself the evidence of his niece's death increased every moment. At last he heard the convent bell strike six; and, with a feeling of relief, he rose and went down-stairs.

He found the señor waiting below, looking triumphant, but cautious. There were several loungers about, enjoying the comparative cool of the evening, and Mr. Mallett and Castellan passed through the room and out of the house without exchanging a word.

But, once safely outside, the señor, who was brimming over with pleasant self-importance, rapidly unfolded the plans which Sister Maria and he had concocted for Mr. Mallett's admittance to the convent burying-ground.

"I shall point out the gate by which monsieur will enter; after that, the rest must depend on monsieur's sagacity and on the exactness with which he carries out my directions. Sister Maria would have nothing to do with you directly; but she will arrange matters so that you can enter the convent by yourself and obtain a view of the tomb. As good fortune will have it, the lady superior is to-day entertaining a very high dignitary of the church, and some of the lay sisters are excused from vespers for the purpose of superintending the dinner. Monsieur will envelop himself in Sister Maria's cloak, and, if he is seen from the chapel windows, they will conclude it is but one of the sisters crossing the grave-yard to gather herbs from the garden which lies beyond."

Then followed a list of directions, to which Mr. Mallett paid the closest attention; and, as the old Spaniard concluded, they came within sight of the Convent of the Holy Assumption. It was a large, square stone building, the massive walls being relieved by small heavily barred windows, giving the place more the appearance

of a fortress or a prison than a convent. A substantial stone wall eight feet high inclosed it on all sides, and on the east front were massive iron gates boarded high above the line of sight to shield the sacred precincts from the vulgar gaze. Further on, on the west side, was a very small wicket, almost hidden under the masses of ivy that hung half way to the ground. This door was the one used by the lay sisters when doing their errands, and a covered way led from it into the main entrance hall.

The bells were still ringing for vespers as Mr. Mallett reached this half-hidden little gate, and, according to directions from Castellan—who was lurking among the brushwood about fifty yards down the road—he gave a low, quick, triple knock three times over, and then waited with his eyes on his watch until five minutes had passed.

The bells ceased ringing. This was the moment agreed on, and he pushed the door gently; it yielded, and the next moment he found himself in the dim light of a long narrow passage.

He stooped and lifted a snuff-colored garment that lay at his feet. It was the huge cloak of a lay sister. He wrapped himself in the capacious garment, carefully drawing the hood well over his head. Having taken off his boots, he went stealthily along the passage, across a large stone-flagged entrance hall, and passed out of what he had been told was the main entrance into the inclosure beyond. He paused here a moment and looked about him attentively. In a line with him stood the chapel on the extreme right, the door of which was open; and he saw the backs of the sisters as they knelt at their devotions. He caught a gleam of gorgeous color as the clear evening light fell through the east window upon the vestments of the priests at the high altar, and a faint odor of incense crept out upon the air. He drew the hood still closer over his beard and crossed the open space to the other side of the chapel. Here he had to pass a whole line of windows, and the profiles of the nuns were turned toward him. He now shortened his stride and drooped his shoulders the better to perform the part he was assuming, and passed on without a glance to the right or to the left. As soon as the windows were passed, he raised his head and looked round again. He was at the edge of the burying-ground and over in the extreme corner under the walls he saw the stone he had come in search of. He recognized it by the semi-circular top—there was not another like it in the inclosure—and his heart quickened a little as he picked his way across the graves.

* * * * *

The sunset sky had changed from crimson to saffron, from saffron to a clear pearly gray, and still the brown cloak stood motionless before the headstone in the far corner of the convent grave-yard.

Mr. Mallett had received a shock that entirely banished his preconceived ideas; and the new beliefs that crowded upon him were so conflicting and confusing that for a time he was overwhelmed with perplexity.

“Pauline Pelling. Died May 29th, 18—.”

He read the simple inscription over and over again; the more he pondered it, the less he understood how it was that he had been decoyed by fate into this fruitless journey.

Why should his niece, Pauline Malling, have a picture of the grave of Pauline Pelling in her possession?—for he no longer doubted that the lady reigning at Mallingford Park was his niece, and concluded that this was the grave of some other person—presumably the wife of his friend Captain Pelling. He remembered the captain's impressive little story of his unhappy marriage and its premature *denouement*; and Mr. Mallett had no doubt whatever that he was now standing by the grave of that gentleman's wife. Still the question kept repeating itself: Why should his niece—of the same Christian name too—treasure up this picture of Mrs. Pelling's grave? He smiled to himself at the freak of fortune that ordained the obliteration of just the first two letters of the surname, and wondered at the insignificance of the trifle that had drawn him from England on such a wild-goose chase!

Sister Maria, to all appearance busy over her stewpans in the kitchen, was working herself into a fever of fright. She expected the exhortation to finish directly, and then the sisters would wander all about the grounds, and her mysterious visitor would be discovered. She quaked with fear as the consequences of her conduct presented themselves to her imagination. She had seen the brown cloak flit noiselessly past the half-closed kitchen door a quarter of an hour before; but she was sure it had not yet gone back.

At last, unable to bear the anxiety any longer, she decided that she must at all risks go and warn the man away before harm came of his dilatoriness. Catching up a basket, and muttering a few words about garnishing to the other busy sisters, she started for the grave-yard. She hurried along, keeping well out of sight of the sisters at their devotions, until she reached the corner.

"Come away at once! You will be discovered; and I shall die of the severity of my penance!" she said, in an earnest whisper.

Mr. Mallett was startled for a moment.

"You are the sister who helped Castellan to admit me?"

"Yes; but, for pity's sake, come away now, or we shall all be ruined!"

There was no mistaking the terror in the poor woman's face; and he started at once. They walked quickly over the grass; but, for all his hurry, Mr. Mallett managed to ask two questions and get two replies before they reached the small door by which he had entered.

"What sort of a person was that Pauline Pelling, who lies buried there?" he asked.

"She was a mere babe, only three months old. She was born in this convent, and died in my arms."

"Merciful Heaven!" exclaimed Mr. Mallett, gazing at her in blank astonishment.

Sister Maria was hurrying him along the narrow passage, for every moment now might lead to discovery.

"And its mother?" he gasped.

"Was the beautiful fair lady for whom Señor Castellan took the view of the grave just before she set out for England."

And before Mr. Mallett had recovered from this last surprise, he found himself outside the door, with his boots on the path beside him, his brain in a whirl of conflicting thoughts.

"Pelling has by some means jumped to the conclusion, or been

led to it intentionally, perhaps, that his wife died in this convent and is buried here, while in truth it is his child's grave, and his wife is still living; and, according to the present aspect of affairs, Pelling's wife and Pauline Malling are evidently one! And she, Pauline Malling, or Pelling, or whatever she is, is going to be married to Dornton to-morrow morning, and she has one husband still living! I wonder if she knows that he is still alive? After all, if this turns out true—and it looks very like it—I shall resume my rightful position at Mallingford, for this girl has disobeyed the clause in Paul's will about not marrying without Summers' consent. And, by George! that provides the motive for her conduct. She knew, if her husband found her, she would be compelled to resign the estate. Well, she has played a successful game so far; it is my innings now."

And that evening Mr. Mallett, who had not been across a horse for nearly twenty years, rode the twelve miles of execrable road that lay between Villa Silentio and Bassillia, and prepared and delivered personally several telegrams to be dispatched directly the office opened in the morning.

CHAPTER XX.

THE eighteenth of September was a damp comfortless morning, and Mallingford Park looked particularly desolate. The sky was of a dull gray, and the rain drizzled steadily all the day through.

Babette was busy in Miss Malling's dressing-room. It was half past nine o'clock, and she had just returned from seeing her mistress off by train. None of the guests were astir yet, and the house was unusually silent, as it was likely to be for some hours. The ball of the previous night had been exceedingly spirited, and was not concluded until nearly six o'clock, so that the visitors would not be likely to be astir very early.

Babette was to join her mistress at Charing Cross Station with the luggage at half past two, and, though her mind was full of tormenting doubts as to the day's events, she went about her business as methodically as though nothing unusual had happened. Tenderly and carefully she folded up the elaborate gown of cream-colored satin, with its draperies of thick costly lace, and its superb bouquets of deep crimson blossoms, in which Miss Malling delighted the eyes of her admirers at the ball. Very circumspectly she placed the magnificent diamonds and rubies, with which her mistress had adorned her shapely throat and arms, in their cases, and then packed them in a small oaken box with steel clamps. Then she went round the room with her keys and locked and strapped the traveling-trunks one after another. That done, she sat down to wait, she knew not for what.

* * * * *

Captain Pelling received a telegram at a quarter to eleven that morning which filled him with surprise and curiosity. It ran:

"At all risks get to Bishopsgate Church in time to see a wedding fixed for this morning, and obtain a good view of the bride's face."

The telegram had been dispatched from Bassillia, and he remembered the name as that of the nearest railway station to the convent where he had found his wife's grave. Without knowing why, he felt that he must obey the telegram, and he pulled on his boots, snatched a hat from the stand as he rushed through the hall, and was just in time to catch the eleven o'clock express for Waterloo. On arriving at his destination, Captain Pelling ran his eyes rapidly down the cab rank within the station, picked out the smartest looking horse, sprung into the cab, and called through the trap to the driver:

"A sovereign if you reach Bishopsgate Church by twenty minutes to twelve!"

The horse justified his good opinion, and the drive was accomplished in good time. The church doors were open, and a four-wheeled cab was waiting outside. He crept in very quietly, and walked up the aisle, not wishing to disturb the service, for he did not know what he was there for save to see the bride's face. He judged rightly that his future conduct was to be guided by that inspection.

The church was cold and gloomy this miserable morning, and a few persons were scattered here and there among the seats, attracted possibly more by curiosity than interest.

As Pelling advanced, he was struck by the subdued richness of the bride's costume, and he was not a little surprised at the absence of the usual attendants—for the old lady standing behind the bride evidently filled the office of pew-opener. The bride and bridegroom were a fine couple, the man being quite six feet high, while the lady was also well proportioned.

Pelling went quietly along the chancel until he reached the end nearest to the altar, and then he waited for the bride to turn her face toward him.

The clergyman's voice went on with the service:

"Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

Then, for the first time, she turned toward Pelling. Her expression was one of unmixed rapture as she raised her eyes to the bridegroom's, and her lips were unclosed to speak the words "I will," when she became aware of Pelling's fixed stare of horror. His gaze attracted her involuntarily, and she looked instinctively over Jack's shoulder in his direction.

Jack, wondering what was the matter, and fearing she was going to faint, prompted her with the short answer. She did not speak, but continued to gaze over his shoulder at the man who had so unaccountably riveted her attention. Her under jaw dropped spasmodically, her eyes became as fixed as those she was gazing into, and every vestige of life and color left her face.

The next thing Jack seemed to realize was that a gentleman wearing a light overcoat was speaking quietly to the astonished clergyman, and suggesting that the lady should be taken to the vestry, as she was evidently very ill.

The scattered congregation looked at each other in wondering

curiosity as the bridal party disappeared. They lingered awhile until the old pew-opener returned and begged them to depart, as she desired to close the church.

Pauline, with a dull, dazed despair in her eyes, sat in the vestry, listening to, without understanding, the conversation of the three men grouped around her.

"I am extremely sorry to have caused this *esclandre*," Pelling said, in answer to the clergyman's request for an explanation; "but it would have been criminal to allow the matter to go further, for the lady is my wife."

"Your wife?" echoed Jack, incredulously.

"Yes, sir, my wife!" Pelling replied, with the least touch of *hauteur*. "I have believed her to be dead for the last six years—in fact, I believed it so thoroughly that I should not have believed my eyes this morning if her own conduct had not betrayed her. It is possible that she thought I was dead, as I have been in Central Africa for several years; and I understand the expedition of which I was a member has been three or four times reported in the newspapers as completely exterminated."

"And how came you to present yourself so opportunely this morning?" asked the clergyman.

"That is more than I understand myself at present; but I think it is due to accidental discoveries made in Spain by a friend of mine who has gone thither on business of his own."

"Interposition of Providence!" murmured the divine.

"Possibly," said Pelling—"though how it happens that I have been led to believe in my wife's death all these years and never found out my mistake before I can not understand."

"Miss Malling took her mother's name when she inherited the estate; perhaps that may explain matters," put in Jack.

"What estate?" asked Pelling, sharply.

"It is all too long to discuss now," Jack answered; "but no doubt the change of name accounts for your ignorance of your wife's existence."

"So you have been a rich woman, Pauline," he said, turning to her kindly. He did not know yet how far this estrangement had been intentional on her part, and he would give her the benefit of the doubt. "I, too, have fallen on prosperous times. Now, what are you going to do? Shall I see you home? Or shall I call on you to-morrow, when you will be quieter and calmer? Or will you come and look at my little place now?"

Then, for the first time, Pauline raised her head; and again Jack saw the expression of the carved tigers' heads as she answered her husband:

"I will not accompany you anywhere; I would sooner kill myself—for I hate you!"

The shocked clergyman would have spoken; but Pelling stopped him courteously but firmly.

"You must pardon me; but this is my affair, as you must acknowledge, and mine only." Then, turning to the raging woman, he went on, "In those circumstances further discussion would be useless;" and only Jack, who was watching him closely, guessed

what wonderful self-control he was exerting to keep himself from exposing and upbraiding the faithless woman to whom he spoke. "I will give you the address of my solicitor, and all future communications must be made through him." He wrote the address on a leaf of his pocket-book, tore it out, and placed it on the table beside her. "And now, Mrs. Pelling, may I see you to your cab?"

She rose and drew herself up defiantly.

"You have forgotten the address," Pelling said.

"I shall not require it, thank you."

"Very good, I shall know all I want to know, nevertheless."

She swept from the vestry; and Pelling followed her in polite attendance. He returned in a few seconds.

"And now, Mr. Dornton," he said, "if you will favor me with your company, I shall be glad to give and receive explanations."

After wishing the clergyman "Good-morning," the two men jumped into the cab which brought Pelling from the station, and drove to an hotel. They talked on indifferent subjects until they were in possession of a private room, and the waiter had finally retired, after receiving orders for luncheon in half an hour. Then Pelling turned to Jack and began:

"It seems to me that you and I are fated to cross each other's paths, Mr. Dornton. I have heard you spoken of pretty often lately by a Mr. Mallett, a particular friend of mine."

"Indeed?" said Jack, uncomfortably, not relishing this sudden and intentional introduction of the Malletts' name; for, since his conversation with Lord Summers, Jack felt less proud than ever of his own share in the rupture with Ethel. He thought, too, that Mr. Pelling would not have heard much to his credit from that source.

"I see what you are thinking," Pelling observed; "but you are wrong. Mr. Mallett has spoken of you to me only as a promising man in your profession. The other matter that is in your mind I took the liberty of finding out for myself. Now, I have a proposition to make to you."

Pelling paused and looked attentively at the young man. He knew there was not much generosity in giving Ethel up, as he could not marry her himself during the lifetime of his wife, and, having plenty of true manliness, he did not mean to make any show of the miserable pain that was gnawing at his heart; but he felt he should like to know what sort of man this was whose path he intended to smooth for him as far as lay in his power; and, while he thought of this, the memory of Ethel's face, pained and sorrowful as he saw it when she made to him her confession of love for this Dornton came suddenly before him, and he knew that the greatest kindness he could do her would be to restore her faithless lover.

"You must be patient with me, and not accuse me of impertinence, when you hear what I have to say, for I really want to do you the best turn you ever had done you in all your life."

He stopped again, and took a few turns across the room.

Jack wondered if his present labored style of talking was usual with him; he spoke as if the utterance of each word cost him a pang. Presently he stopped in front of Jack, and said, abruptly:

"You have nearly broken Ethel's heart."

Jack flushed furiously, and half rose from his chair. Pelling motioned to him to keep calm.

"I asked you to be patient with me," he reminded Jack. "My motive should excuse me to you. The pith of the whole matter is this—was the engagement between you and Ethel broken off in consequence of your infatuation for my wife, or had you ceased to care for her before you met Pauline? As man to man, I ask you for a truthful answer."

"I can't for the life of me understand by what right," began Jack, hotly.

"For Heaven's sake, don't waste time in splitting straws when so much is at stake!" Pelling said, impetuously. "You can't understand my right to interfere? I will explain. I love Ethel Mallett as I never loved, never shall love, never believed it possible to love; and until this morning I had the hope of making her my wife some day, when she had had time to forget you and your cowardly brutality. Forgive me—I did not mean to touch on that part of the business. Let us stick to our point. I think my love for her gives me the right to do what I can to secure her happiness; and I believe—nay, I am sure—her happiness rests with you. I can't have her myself, or I do not think I could be unselfish enough to give her up. I might; but I don't think it. Now—to return to our point—was your infatuation for my wife the only cause of the estrangement between you two?"

Jack was greatly impressed, as he understood now why Pelling spoke with so much effort, and he felt touched by his devotion. Added to this was the feeling of shame that had oppressed him ever since his talk with Lord Summers.

"Come—you needn't mind confessing your weakness to me," Pelling went on, encouragingly. "Bless you, man, I know how Pauline can twist any man round her finger if she likes to try! I suppose she was smitten with you, and spread her nets to snare you, and you, not seeing the snare, found yourself passionately enamored of her without knowing how it happened. And I dare say, if the truth were known, when the first mad burst was over, and you thought out things quietly, you would have given a good deal never to have seen her at all, and wished you had behaved differently to Miss Mallett."

Jack jumped up, with his face beaming, and wrung Pelling's hand.

"I could not say it myself, but that is really just how it has been with me. I am not good at expressing my feelings; but I know you are behaving very well to me—much better than I deserve—and I thank you. And now what do you wish me to do?"

"Go right away for a few months. Write to me now and again, and I will take care that Miss Mallett hears whatever is likely to be of use to you. Give her time to forget the indignity you have put on her and her love. I shall be at hand in the character of a benevolent patriarch, and the moment I see signs favorable to our plot I will bring about a meeting. The rest will lie with yourself."

"How can I thank you?"

"You owe me no thanks. Relieve your mind on that point. What I am doing I do out of my sincere wish for Miss Mallett's

happiness. If you really think you owe me anything pay it in kindness to your wife after you are married. Here is luncheon. We will talk by and by of your immediate plans."

When they had finished luncheon, and Jack had left, Pelling lay down on the hard horsehair sofa, with his hands under his head, gazing steadfastly at the ceiling; and it was not until the evening, when the waiter came to light the gas, that he was roused from his deep reverie. He then pulled himself together, called for his bill, and having settled it, went out into the wretched night.

* * * * *

When Pauline left her husband at the church door she knew that her scheming had been futile, and that she could never again show her face at Mallingsford; but it was not that which caused her the agony of mind she was suffering.

She had lost Jack. The one pure unselfish cup of joy she had longed to taste had been snatched from her lips at the moment of raising. She was stunned with despair.

Why had her poverty-stricken husband, whom she had had sufficient excuse for believing dead all these years, lived to bring this misery on her? she asked herself vainly; but she had no thought for the possible hardships he might have undergone during those six years which she had passed so luxuriously.

The future stretched before her, a long, dreary, monotonous waste, and she saw herself unloved and unloving. She had made up her mind to lead a good, unselfish life with Jack, to try to be more open, more honest and straightforward than she had been in the past. She had over and over again pictured to herself the one stormy scene they would have after their marriage, when she should tell him of her previous marriage, and the deceit it had entailed, and she had dwelt with exquisite pleasure on the joy of their reconciliation—for how could Jack withstand her loving self-abasement, her pitiful appeal for pardon, and her hearty promises never to be guilty of another unworthy action? And then, perhaps Jack, in his honest way, would insist upon Lord Summers being told everything, and perhaps Mallingsford might be taken from them! But even then they would still have each other, and she would be a good helpmate and faithful wife to him, helping and encouraging him to cross the stony places that, more or less, form part of the path to fame for those who tread it.

But fate had been very cruel to her. She had hoped to atone for her past life; but, as the opportunity had been denied her, she would finish in her own way, and fill her life with reckless rioting, and live so that she might have no spare moments to think of what might have been. She would go back to the feverish excitement of her youth—she would go to Paris and gamble—do anything that offered the means of killing time and thought.

She paced up and down the platform at Charing Cross Station, watching for Babette and concocting plans for obtaining what ready money she could before the grand *denouement* came. She knew her jewels must be worth at least five thousand pounds, and, though some of them were heir-looms, and others had been bought with money obtained by her dishonestly, she would not scruple to

apply them to her personal use. Then she would draw at once two thousand from her bankers. She would go and do this personally lest they might scruple to pay so large a sum on a check. And so she laid her miserable plans, refusing to listen for one moment to the prompting of her better nature, which would even now suggest her return to the husband whose only sin had been his poverty.

CHAPTER XXI.

NOTWITHSTANDING all Pelling's efforts, the story soon got into the newspapers, and, it being the dull season, was seized upon with avidity by the gossip-purveyors. It was "dished" and "re-dished" day after day, with numberless distortions, exaggerations, and additions. One society journal had it that the beautiful Miss M—— of M—— Park, in Exbridgeshire, had attempted to poison her husband, to whom she had been secretly married only a month or two, in order to become the wife of a celebrated R. A., with whom she had fallen deeply in love; while another declared that the injured husband presented himself at the altar with pistols, and, dragging his would-be successor outside the sacred edifice, insisted upon a duel *à outrance* there and then, and wounded him dangerously in the shoulder, and that the unfortunate man now lay in a most critical condition, while the husband had carried off his reluctant bride, a veritable prisoner, on board his yacht, for a twelvemonth's cruise in the Pacific.

At last Pelling, annoyed beyond measure at these absurd stories, decided to lay bare the truth. With the assistance of his lawyer, he drew up a concise statement of the real facts, giving his own and Pauline's name in full, but suppressing Jack's. He carefully conveyed the idea that Pauline believed him to be dead, and gave the circumstance of her change of name as sufficient to account for his not having discovered her existence since his return from Africa. This he sent to two of the daily newspapers; and, thus divested of all mystery, the story lost its charm, and no longer afforded any interest.

Pelling sent one of these newspapers, with his own letter specially distinguished, to Ethel by post; and the next morning he called in Buckingham Street to make matters clearer.

It was now a week since the interrupted wedding and Pauline's flight, and, strangely enough, he had not heard anything of the change in Mr. Mallett's circumstances. He had been fighting his own battle, and even yet he could hardly trust himself in Ethel's presence; he doubted if he had gained sufficient mastery over his feelings to enable him to act the part of the disinterested elderly friend. As he mounted the stairs he remembered with pain how happy he was the last time he came down those same stairs, and he felt inclined to turn and fly.

But Ethel's frank candor once more overcame the difficulties of the situation; she stood at the top of the stairs with her hands outstretched and her face bright with friendly interest.

"I have been longing to see you," she began, warmly, as they

entered the room; "we have both so much that is wonderful to tell each other!"

She looked at him steadfastly as he stood in the light from the window, and what she saw in his face quickened her pulse with a sudden pity; but she would not give way to the impulse that urged her to console him. She went on, a little hurriedly at first:

"I can see that your pleasant news is in some way mixed up with painful thoughts; so, as mine is altogether pleasant, I shall speak first. To begin—papa came home last night, and he has brought the most wonderful news; it is like a fairy-tale! I don't suppose you know yet that your wife is my cousin?"—Capt. Pelling started at the words—"I knew you would be greatly surprised. My father is not really Mr. Mallett—his true name is Sir Geoffrey Malling, and he is your wife's uncle. In some extraordinary way, which papa will explain, the whole of the Mallingford property comes to him in the event of Pauline's marrying under twenty-five without her guardian's consent; so, you see, we are going to be very great people. I believe my mother was not so well born as papa, and the late baronet was so angry when he heard of the marriage that he disinherited papa, who at once changed his name and worked hard to keep his wife. I think it must have been very trying to him, after his luxurious bringing up, don't you? How astonished you look! I hope you are not angry with us because we are going to take away your wife's wealth. Of course that is only nonsense! I know you are not angry; I've heard you say often how glad you would have been to share what you have with her."

Ethel paused. Pelling did not speak, and she felt a little anxious. She had unintentionally stumbled upon the subject; but she knew it could not be avoided between them, so she screwed up her courage and went on:

"Perhaps I should not say what I am going to say; but no real harm can come from straightforwardness. We have been such good friends in the past—and I hope we shall continue to be so in the future—that we need not stay to pick and choose our words to each other, need we? I want to congratulate you on the recovery of your wife; but there is something in your face that checks me. Will you tell me all about it?"

Pelling leaned forward and took her hand. She shrunk a little at his touch; but, whatever the feeling was that caused her to recoil she kept all sign of it from her face as she sat opposite to him waiting for him to speak.

"I can't tell you all about it," he said, presently. "I only know that my wife refused to have anything to do with me—said she would kill herself sooner—and that she is now in Paris, leading a reckless life, and doing everything that I should wish my wife not to do."

Ethel looked surprised.

"If I were you I should go to Paris, too," she said.

"I suppose I ought—in fact, I know I ought—and I have tried to make up my mind to go; but I can not."

For an instant he dropped his head upon his hand, and a great rush of pity set Ethel's heart beating oddly. He pulled himself together with an impatient exclamation.

"What a bore you must think me!" he said, quickly. "Let us drop the subject. If I ever find you can help me in any way, I will come to you at once. As things are now, the less said the better."

Then, turning the conversation, he added:

"And so you are to possess the wealth which Pauline has forfeited? I am very glad—very, very glad—on all accounts but one."

"And that is?"

"It will make Dornton's task harder."

The blood rushed over Ethel's face in a quick flush, and it left again as quickly.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

"I mean that Dornton was beguiled by my unhappy wife into doing as he did, that he was not master of his own actions, and that he would give a very great deal to be assured of your entire forgiveness. He has loved you all through his mad folly. He told me so himself on the very day of the wedding, before he could have known anything of the change in your worldly affairs; so, when you think of him in the future, you must not believe he was governed by mercenary considerations."

All through this speech the wonder had deepened on Ethel's face, and she looked at him steadily.

"Thank you for your kind defense of him," she responded, rising as her father entered the room. "I will remember to do as you say;" and she turned gayly to the door. "And now let me introduce you to Sir Geoffrey Malling of Mallingford Park."

"I need not tell you how glad I am to hear of this wonderful business," Pelling said, shaking hands warmly. "And now you must tell me how you came across the evidence of my wife's existence, and how you, of all people, heard of her intended marriage, for I am brimming over with curiosity. It seems to me that fate has interwoven our destinies *nolens volens*."

* * * * *

A few weeks later Ethel and her father were settled at Mallingford. All the necessary legal formalities had been gone through, and the county families had called upon Sir Geoffrey and his daughter. Lord Summers had suggested that the baronet should have a public reception; but Sir Geoffrey had sternly and emphatically opposed any such demonstration. So father and daughter had come down and been met at the railway station by the family carriage, and had gone quietly to their respective rooms, after shaking hands with a few of the old servants whom Sir Geoffrey remembered in his brother's time, and had eaten their first dinner at Mallingford as if they had but just returned from a short visit.

But the next morning, as they lingered over their late breakfast, Sir Geoffrey realized that he was not to be allowed to take possession in the quiet manner he had wished.

It was the third week in November. The fine old trees that lined the drive were stripped of their summer finery, and there was a slight touch of frost in the air. Sir Geoffrey was deep in a political article, and Ethel was feasting her eyes on the delicate tracery of the bare elms against the steel-blue sky.

"What are all those men doing, I wonder?" she remarked presently. Her father took no notice, but continued his reading until she added, "Look, papa—there are at least fifty men coming up the avenue."

Sir Geoffrey then glanced up from his newspaper.

"It is a deputation of the tenantry," he said, dejectedly. "Come, Ethel—we may as well face the inevitable."

So it happened that, in spite of himself, Sir Geoffrey had to listen to a speech of welcome; and, after he had thanked the men for their kind expressions of good will, some one in the background shouted out, "Three cheers for Sir Geoffrey, and may every man have his own!"—and the hall rung again with the echoes of their lusty voices. Then the same enthusiast insisted upon "Another for the young lady!"—and this was responded to as heartily as the other proposal.

Sir Geoffrey, with a gratified gleam in his eyes, and a softened look about his mouth, turned to Mrs. Perkins, who, with the rest of the servants, had hurried into the back part of the hall, and told her to do the best she could to make their guests welcome. There was a hasty tapping of barrels, and a cold collation was soon set before the enthusiastic tenantry.

Sir Geoffrey's wealthy neighbors, too, were not less hearty in their welcome. Poor Ethel wearied of the calls of elegantly dressed women who came to pay their respects to her; but she did her best to play the part of hostess, and the unanimous opinion among the ladies was that she was "quite nice—so different from what one would expect from her bringing up!"

At the end of a fortnight Ethel felt as if matters had never been different. She had become used to the morning chats with Mrs. Perkins and the afternoon gossip with neighbors, and she was getting resigned to the continual presence of a maid in her rooms. This was very distasteful to her at first; and it was only in deference to her father's strongly expressed wish that she consented to endure the infliction.

Sir Geoffrey had slipped back naturally enough into his old life. His twenty years' struggle with the world had given him a keener appreciation of his present comforts than he would ever have experienced without it, and he had but one regret—that the sweet, lovable woman for whose sake he had sacrificed all this worldly prosperity years before was not now with him to enjoy his recovery of it. He packed away his drawing paraphernalia, locked up the box with a feeling that he was throwing from him a heavy burden, and made up his mind never to handle pencil or brush again.

There were moments, however, in spite of the many duties of her new position, when Ethel felt a dreary emptiness, when she felt a dissatisfied longing for something which all her luxurious surroundings could not give her. At such times she told herself that she would gladly relinquish all the pomp and circumstance of the present to enjoy the unalloyed happiness that had been hers in the past.

When in this mood, her thoughts generally wandered to Jack. She was truly sorry for him, and wished she could tell him so; but, after all that had happened, she could not forget what was due to

her own self-respect. But there could be no harm, she decided, in asking Captain Pelling if he had heard of him lately. Poor Captain Pelling! She was sorry for him too, and she admired him more than she had ever admired any man, always excepting her father.

CHAPTER XXII.

IT was Sir Geoffrey's first dinner party, and Ethel felt just a little nervous as she received the guests. Captain Pelling, who had arrived to-day for a week's stay, was watching her in the pauses of his chat with Bertha Collins. He caught her eye presently, and smiled at her reassuringly, for she had confided to him her dread of the awful occasion.

"You are an old friend of theirs, are you not?" Bertha was saying to the captain. "We all think Miss Malling quite charming. I took to her from the first; but, do you know, she is not easy to get on with. Of course she is all one could wish as a hostess; but it is impossible to gush with her. She has a way of sifting all one says, and showing up anything that is absurd, without certainly in the least intending to give offense. You would hardly believe it, I dare say; but I have adopted the habit of trying to talk seriously when she is listening."

Pelling was amused, and he did not conceal it.

"I think that is the greatest compliment you could pay her," he said. "Will you adopt the same practice with me?"

Miss Collins shook her head, with a look of intense wisdom.

"I should not dare," she replied, with mock gravity. "If I were to get a reputation for seriousness, I should probably die an old maid."

"Why so?"

"As if you did not know! Men always prefer frivolous talkers for their wives. There is the dinner-bell. Are you to take me down?"

Later in the evening Miss Collins dropped into a quiet corner and discussed things with the utmost freedom with an intimate friend whom she had not seen since the end of the season. She was describing the breaking up of the party when Pauline's intended marriage had been discovered.

"Now tell me—could there be anything more ridiculous than her running away from her own house and marrying, or trying to marry, a man secretly, when there was no one to prevent her doing it openly? My dear, you should have seen our faces when Mrs. Sefton—her chaperone, you know—read us the note she had left behind, as we dropped in, one after another to luncheon! At first everybody looked very surprised, and then the absurdity of the whole proceeding struck us. Why could she not have been married properly? No one could have objected to her marrying that good-looking artist if she chose to do so."

"Was she very much 'gone' on him?"

"Awfully! It must have been a terrible blow to her when her husband turned up."

"Rather! Isn't it odd, his being here?"

"I don't think so. He was very good to Sir Geoffrey when he was in less affluent circumstances, I believe."

"Things seem a bit mixed. From what I could make out, he had believed himself a widower, just as she had thought herself a widow, until they met in the church. Don't you think it probable that, while he was under the impression that his wife was dead, he may have had a liking for Miss Malling?"

"I believe you are right," Bertha, replied energetically, "for I saw him looking at her before dinner with his heart in his eyes."

"It is certainly very strange that he should have fallen in love with the girl who was being kept out of her right position by his own wife! It looks like the finger of Fate, doesn't it—though which way the finger is pointing I can't see."

As the guests, one after another, took their departure, Ethel felt her burden lightening. Her first party had been an unqualified success, but she was none the less glad to have it over.

Lord Summers stayed behind, talking earnestly with Sir Geoffrey.

"I admit I was disappointed when I heard that she had taken the family jewels with her," he said, in allusion to Pauline. "I'm afraid she has inherited some of her father's want of principle. The Luftons were never particularly distinguished for honesty. What do you mean to do about it, Geoffrey?"

"About what?"

"The recovery of the jewels."

"Nothing openly. I am in communication with her waiting-maid, who has promised to let me know if there is any idea on Pauline's part of selling them, and I shall, unknown to her, become the purchaser."

"An excellent idea and a very generous one. By the bye, as things have turned out, how fortunate it is that the engagement between our charming Ethel and young Dornton was—"

He stopped suddenly as Ethel and Pelling came back from bidding farewell to Miss Collins. They both caught the drift of his words, and Ethel glanced at Pelling's face; but it was calmly unconscious. Thinking this a good opening to talk of Jack, she said:

"If you are not too tired, I want to show you a delightful style of title-page that I came across this morning. I thought you might elaborate the idea for your 'Central Africa.' It is on this table somewhere."

"I am afraid my share of 'Central Africa' will not be anything to be proud of," he replied, with a smile.

Ethel was busy searching for the book as she answered decisively:

"That is nonsense, and you know it, Captain Pelling! I have made up my mind that your sketches are to be the principal attraction of the book. It is really unkind of you to make light of your work after all our interest in it!"

"That is just it," he returned laughingly. "I have become so accustomed to working in company that I find I can't move a step by myself."

The words rather startled Ethel, for she discerned more meaning in them than they bore on the surface. She had seen very little of

the captain since her father's return from Spain, and she was suddenly struck by the great alteration in his face. There were lines of pain and trouble round his mouth which she had never noticed before, and the knowledge seemed to come to her suddenly that this man loved her still, that he loved her in spite of himself. She had seen enough of him to know that he was the soul of honor, and she gauged the depth of his love by the fact that his heart refused in this instance to be governed by his sense of right. In her great pity for him she forgot all about her intended inquiries after Jack.

"We are great friends, are we not?" she asked, after a pause.

He looked surprised at her irrelevancy, as he answered:

"I hope and think so."

"And you would not be offended at anything I should say for your good?"

Captain Pelling thought he knew what was coming, and he prepared himself for the shock.

"Go on," he said between his clinched teeth, and waited with knitted brows for what she had to say.

Ethel, in her short life, had often had unpleasant tasks to perform, but never one so unpleasant as this.

"Out of your own mouth shall you be judged," she began, smiling at him to hide the trembling of her lips. "You say you have become so used to working in company that you can not move a step by yourself; but I say you must take the one needful step by yourself that will secure you good company to work in for the rest of your life. Go to Paris at once, seek out your wife, and give her the protection of your presence. She will yield. You must not judge her by her words when you last met. You had her at a cruel disadvantage. Think what an awful shock your sudden appearance must have been to her! It is very, very hard for me to say this to you, after all your kindness to us in the past; but you will not misjudge my motive. I am speaking for your good. By and by, when you are quite happy with each other, you will be thankful to me for sending you away in this abrupt manner."

"You wish me to go at once?" he asked.

"That is a very cruel way to put it," she answered, gently. "You know I do not—so far as I am personally concerned—wish you to go at all. True friends are not so plentiful that one can afford to play battledore and shuttlecock with them for one's own pleasure. For your own good, Captain Pelling, I advise your going at once."

As she said this, she caught a gleam from his eyes which gave a meaning she had not intended to her words. He believed she was alluding to the danger to him of being in her presence continually. She faltered, and a distressed flush colored her face; her eyes fell, and her lips trembled warningly. He pushed forward a low chair, and put her into it.

"You are one of the best women that ever lived," he exclaimed, "and I am proud to have had you for a friend! I ought to have known my presence would give you pain, and refused Sir Geoffrey's invitation. Don't speak until I've finished," he went on, hurriedly, holding up his hand to check any interruption. "I shall follow

your advice to the letter. I will thrust aside my own inclinations, and run over to Paris and see what Mrs. Pelling is doing, spend Christmas among the Frenchmen, and perhaps in the New Year Captain and Mrs. Pelling may have the honor of receiving Sir Geoffrey and Miss Malling at the Wigwam."

For once Ethel looked at him with her eyes brimming with tears; but she did not dare make an attempt to speak. He took her hand in his, and held it close as he finished.

"You must make some plausible excuse to Sir Geoffrey for my abrupt departure in the morning; or, better still, I will wire from town. I shall write to you from Paris, if I may. And now, before I say good-night, I must give you this letter. I received it two days ago from Dornton. I know it will please you. He and I correspond regularly; so I shall keep you posted up in his movements. Good-by, my true, honest little friend."

She sat, as he left her, holding Jack's letter in her hand, hearing his voice very faintly in the distance as he excused himself with the plea of fatigue to her father, and wondering how it had happened that this interview, which she had brought about for the sole purpose of hearing news of Jack, had ended in so sudden a determination on the captain's part to seek his wife. She knew his resolve was the result of her advice, and she hoped devoutly that good might come of it.

And Pelling mounted the wide stairs very slowly, deep in thought as he went.

"She is quite right, as she is always. It is the only thing to do; and I never saw it myself. My place is undoubtedly by my wife's side."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"I TELL you your presence here is an unwarrantable intrusion! If you do not leave my apartment of your own free will, I shall be compelled to have you ejected!"

It was the third day since Pelling left Ethel, and this was his wife's greeting! He had had a long battle with himself; but duty had been triumphant, and his mind once made up he was not to be discouraged by a few bitter words.

"That is not necessary. Of course I will leave you; but you will not refuse to answer me one or two questions first?"

This quiet manner was quite different from the masterful tone Pauline had expected; she could hold her own if he stormed or upbraided her, but she hardly saw her way to quarrel with a man who refused to quarrel.

"Ask your questions then, and, if I choose to answer them, I will. If I don't choose, I will not. But, for Heaven's sake, get over them quickly!"

Pelling sat down, and Pauline watched him in sullen silence. He looked round the handsomely furnished but untidy room, and presently his gaze came back to his wife, beautiful even in her dishabille; and, as he looked at her, his heart almost failed him, and he asked himself angrily why he should take so much trouble to ac-

comply with an end which he so little desired. Her handsome brown eyes were watching him with a furtive hate, and her finely formed lips were pressed together vindictively. He half rose from his chair with the intention of leaving her, when the thought of the little grave-stone in a far-off land determined him to stay.

"Will you tell me something of our child, Pauline?" he asked.

She sprung up with a look of desperate fright on her face.

"How dare you come here to browbeat me like this?" she exclaimed, vehemently; and then she sunk back on the couch again. But, after a pause, she said quietly enough: "You have touched my one weak point. Of course you have a right to hear what there is to tell. My baby was born a weakly little thing. I had hard work to keep body and soul together in those first days after my father's death. I knew from the first she could not live long. She died when she was three months old."

"I wish she had lived."

Pauline looked at him as if she doubted his reason.

"Why do you wish such a mad thing as that?"

"Because, if it had not been for seeing her grave, I should have gone on searching for you until I found you."

"Ah! And if you had found me then, if you had come to Maltingford quietly and said, 'Pauline, you are my wife; come with me,' do you know what I would have done? I would have killed you! I would kill you even now, if your death would undo any of the harm you have worked me! But it is all over—everything is over—and the next thing you will hear is that I have killed myself!"

The words were spoken very quietly, very earnestly.

"Why do you hate me so bitterly, Pauline?" he asked; and he studied her attentively while she answered:

"Because you have been my evil genius ever since I became your wife. If I had not married you, my life might have been as happy and pleasant as other women's lives are. No sooner did I know that I was my uncle's heiress than my happiness was destroyed by hearing that I was to inherit only on the condition that I did not marry without my guardian's consent. Thanks to you, this condition was already broken; and my six years of possession have been embittered by the certainty in my own mind that you were alive somewhere and would surely find me some day, and deprive me of all that I had risked so much to obtain."

"I think I begin to understand," Pelling said, quietly. "You had known so well the bitterness of poverty in your father's lifetime that, when you saw this chance of wealth, you were tempted too strongly. You felt you could sacrifice everything and everybody if you could forever place yourself beyond the reach of want. My poor girl! if I could have found you—if you had not taken such pains to throw me off your track—what sorrow might have been spared us both! Two days after I left you so suddenly in Rome I found myself the possessor of an income of over three thousand a year. Ah, Pauline, if you had only acted honestly, how comparatively happy we might have been!"

"Three thousand a year!" she repeated, absently.

The look of active hate had given place to one of apathetic de-

spair. They remained steadily regarding each other for a few moments. Suddenly she burst into a fit of soul-freezing laughter.

"And people say there is a Providence!" she cried wildly. "If I had known this at that time, when I had some kindness for you in my heart, how different matters might have been!"

"And you would have known it had it not been for the barrier your own trickery had raised between us. 'Tis your own sin that has done the evil."

Again her mood changed, and she turned upon him suddenly.

"I consented to answer or to listen to one or two questions; but I can dispense with all preaching," she said defiantly. "If you have asked all you want to know, I beg you to leave me."

Pelling sighed heavily and took up his hat.

"You will let me come and see you again?"

"Why? You do not care for me in the least. Why should you take so much trouble to be civil to me?"

"You are my wife. No amount of dislike or shortcoming on your part alters that fact. We have been very unfortunate in the past. I can see you are unhappy; and, in an indirect way, I am the cause of your unhappiness. I would give a great deal to make things brighter for you, if you would let me."

She was touched by the earnestness of his manner and tone.

"You are very good," she said; "and I am sorry I behaved so badly to you."

She stood silent for a few moments, Pelling watching her quietly; while they so stood, the clock on the mantel-piece struck twelve.

"You must go now," she told him hurriedly. "I have an appointment to ride with some friends. Come again at this time to-morrow."

He did not attempt any outward display of affection, but turned at the door, saying:

"Until to-morrow, then"—and passed down the stairs.

He met Babette half way down.

"With whom does your mistress ride to-day?" he asked.

"With the Baroness de Belette"—a woman well known for the pertinacity with which she had clung to the extreme edge of respectable society for the last five years while defying many of its laws. "They have a wager as to who will ride the greatest distance on a horse belonging to Monsieur Crevin which has always refused to carry a lady."

Pelling went on with a little unacknowledged anxiety in his heart. He would go back and try to dissuade Pauline from this mad freak, but that he knew it would be useless; and any show of authority on his part just now might perhaps undo the little good he believed he had accomplished.

He drove straight back to his hotel, and sat with his chin resting on his hands at the little table in the window of his room. He was in a strange state of mingled hope and dread. He did not know what he wished; he only knew that he meant to do what he conceived to be his duty; the rest he must leave in higher hands.

As he sat there, his thoughts wandered to Ethel, now forever removed from his path in life, a sweet, fair dream of what might have

been. He sighed as he recalled her vivid smile of thanks gleaming through her tears when he placed Jack Dornton's letter in her hand.

Whilst thus musing over the past, he was brought back to the present by the sight of his wife cantering by in company with several others; and, following them, he noticed a fidgety chestnut horse, with a side-saddle on, which was being led by a groom. Pauline looked up and bowed gravely; he returned the greeting.

How handsome she looked! How well she sat her horse! How proud he might have been of her if she had never allowed the lust of riches to crowd the womanliness out of her heart! He leaned forward and watched her as far as he could see from the window.

* * * * *

An hour later Pelling was stooping over his wife's poor crushed body in one of the little *châlets* in the Bois de Boulogne. She had been thrown and trampled on, and was dying of internal hemorrhage. Her voice was very low, and her words came slowly, with many pauses.

"It is Heaven's justice! After you had gone this morning, I made up my mind to do as you wished. I thought I would try to love you—you were so good—and we should be—happy together. I had no right to be happy—after my wickedness, and Heaven has—settled it!"

"My poor mistaken girl!"

"Yes, that is true. I've been mistaken all—my life. No one ever—tried to make me good. I was always left to servants—when I was—a little child, and I learned evil—easily, I suppose. Heaven is just, and the great Judge will remember my—great temptations. Will you kiss me—just once, Alec? Say you forgive me—it will make my mind easier."

In spite of his efforts not to disturb her last moments by any show of feeling, a large tear dropped upon her face.

She looked at him wonderingly, and put up her finger to his cheek.

"For me," she said very softly—"you cry for me? I do not deserve—to have one mourner—at my death-bed. I have done evil to every one—but Jack. Give him my—"

She stopped a moment, and a sharp spasm distorted her beautiful features. She spoke again; but her voice was growing weaker.

"I will not—leave messages; they might bring a curse."

Another spasm seized her; and, when it had passed, the hue of death was creeping over her face. It was all finished now, and the strong young life that had been so misused had come to an end.

Pelling took out a card, and left it with the people of the house, and then went straightway to see that all the necessary arrangements were made for the interment of her who had once been very dear to him.

He wrote a short letter to Sir Geoffrey that night. It ran:

"DEAR SIR GEOFFREY,—Your niece, my wife, was killed by a fall from her horse to-day. We were reconciled at the last. Tell your daughter I can never express my gratitude to her for sending me here; it will always be a source of thankfulness in my heart.

The family jewels are intact, Babette tells me, and they will be sent by special courier. When the funeral is over, I think I shall join Dornton in Italy, and toward the spring we may work our way homeward in company. Ask Miss Ethel to keep us ever green in her memory. I've set my heart on seeing our young friend Jack a Royal Academician before many years. With his talent, he wants only a little judicious pushing, and I mean to devote my time to pushing him.

"Always your sincere friend,

"ALEXANDER PELLING."

Ethel was greatly affected by this letter, and she went about with a very sober face for some weeks, until the preparations for Christmas absorbed her, and left her no time for thinking of handsome young artists or anything else. But, even in the midst of the excitement of Christmastide, there was always a craving in her heart, a dreary sense of emptiness, which grew and grew until she was compelled, with many blushes, to admit its presence, and to acknowledge to herself that only one person in all the world could fill the void.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE weeks slipped by, and the young spring began to send out its forerunners. It had been a mild winter, and the big horse-chestnuts in the Mallingford woods sent forth their round pale buds quite a fortnight earlier than usual.

To Ethel the air was full of sweet voices that whispered gently of coming happiness—for were not the wanderers coming home when the hawthorn bloomed? With a shining joy in her eyes she went about among her father's guests during those early spring days, and Sir Geoffrey smiled to himself as he remarked the change. He thought himself a shrewd observer, and fancied he had found out the cause of her previous depression and her present content.

A young fellow named Farrington, the son of a friend of Sir Geoffrey's youth, had been among the Christmas visitors at Mallingford, and it was soon apparent that he had fallen desperately in love with sweet-faced Ethel. He was a most estimable young man, with a substantial rent-roll, and, knowing himself to be a desirable *parti*, he went to Sir Geoffrey and asked his consent, feeling quite satisfied as to what would be the result.

Then Sir Geoffrey spoke to Ethel, and was astonished on receiving an emphatic refusal, coupled with the declaration that her heart was not her own to bestow. So, Sir Geoffrey, bearing in mind the girl's happy excitement over Pelling's letters, which contained nothing but accounts of Dornton's industry, talent, and success, put two and two together, and decided that she was still true to her first love. He was a little disappointed that it should be so; but he had married for love himself, and he was not going to attempt to influence his daughter in the selection of her husband.

So a warm invitation was sent to the roaming artists, and Ethel

settled down into a beatific state of anticipation; and one soft spring day toward the end of April they arrived.

Nearly all Sir Geoffrey's neighbors were in London by this time, and Ethel had been rather puzzled as to how she should provide a party to meet the two men; but her father put an end to her perplexity by desiring her to entertain them strictly *en famille*.

"We can have one or two dinners, if you like, during their stay," he said; "but I should prefer you not to fill the house with ordinary society visitors. You see, they both knew us in our poverty, and I should like to enjoy their society without the restraint of strangers' presence."

Sir Geoffrey actually drove over himself to meet them, and Ethel put on her prettiest hat and accompanied him. She did not go on the platform with her father, but sat waiting in the carriage. Her heart fluttered a good deal as she sat there watching the few passengers pass by ones and twos through the little station-door. She wondered what could be keeping them.

At last her father came out, and with him a handsome sun-burnt, broad-shouldered, bearded giant, whom Ethel regarded with no little surprise. Could this self-possessed, courteous creature be Jack—her Jack, whom she used to chide sometimes for his little mistakes, who had often confessed that he owed what little polish he had to his intercourse with her and her father? She was so astonished at the change in the man and his manners that some of her feeling found its way into her face.

An amused look stole into his eyes as he stood bare-headed waiting until she should offer her hand. Ethel caught the twinkle and its meaning, and blushed.

"How changed you are!" she had almost said "improved."
"You look as if you had enjoyed your winter very much."

"I have; but I hope to enjoy my spring better."

Something in the words jarred on Ethel's nice sense of tact. She glanced quickly at him, blushed again, and changed the subject.

"Where's Captain Pelling, papa?"

That gentleman stepped forward from behind the pillar of the portico, where, with a strange longing, he had stood watching the eloquent little pantomime of blushes and glances that had just taken place.

The girl looked at him for a moment in even greater surprise than she had at Jack. She grew very pale, then extended both hands quickly.

"I am so glad to see you again," she said, "though I am sorry to see you looking so tired. I don't think traveling agrees with you. You must stay at Mallingford, and be nursed until you are quite well."

A dusky red—called up perhaps by the warmth of her greeting—suddenly spread over his face, then left it again as colorless as before.

"I am all right," he returned, smiling at the anxious look in her eyes. "I'm as hard as nails; nothing ever ails me."

"We won't argue the question now," she said, with her usual brightness. "Are all your belongings right? Let us get home

then, and have some luncheon; I am absolutely famished. Come, papa."

The three men took their seats in the roomy barouche, and the talk became general. Ethel, leaning back in her corner, and taking mental note of the trouble and suffering written so unmistakably on Pelling's face, did not notice that she in turn was being watched as closely by some one else, who, by the end of the five-mile drive, had come to the conclusion that he had been decoyed to Mal-lingford under false pretenses, and had made up his mind to take the first opportunity of ascertaining the truth from her own lips. But the opportunity did not present itself so readily as he had hoped, and three days passed without a chance of a *tête-à-tête*. On the fourth, however, things changed. It was the day of the private view at the Academy. Of course Sir Geoffrey, by the right of his old associations, had the *entrée*; so equally, of course, had Jack as an exhibitor.

The rooms were, as usual, crowded to excess. Jack and Sir Geoffrey were in front, and Ethel was with Pelling. Jack turned suddenly, with his face aglow and his eyes shining, and said, in a proud whisper:

"By Jove, Pelling, it's on the line!"

Pelling pressed forward and shook him stealthily by the hand. Ethel saw the movement and for a moment wished she was a man to inspire such a friendship as existed between these two; then she offered her congratulations warmly and sincerely.

The other two passed on, leaving Ethel with Jack to take note of the points of the picture. Jack, seizing the opportunity, bent his head and whispered:

"Do you remember my water-color of last year?"

"To be sure," she answered, without any sign beyond a slight increase of color that the memory was a disquieting one.

"How much has happened since then that I could wish undone!"

"And I, also."

"Do you mean that!"

"Why should I say it unless I did?"

Jack looked excited. It was an awkward place to make an avowal of love, certainly, but he would not lose the opportunity she had given him. He leaned forward and pointed out some flaw in a picture before them, without in the least knowing what he was saying, then whispered close to her ear:

"And do you really love me still? And may I try to repair my past folly by loving you more than ever?"

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CHAPTER XXV.

"Do you love me still? Will you let me repair my past folly?" again Jack whispered.

Ethel's answer completely staggered him.

"There are two questions, and they require two answers," she replied, in a low steady voice. "I do not love you still—not as I did then. And, in my opinion, nothing could repair your past

folly. Weakness and faithlessness are just the two failings I could never excuse in a man. They are so supremely feminine!"

Jack straightened himself rigidly.

"I have been misled," he said, shortly.

"Not by me, directly or indirectly."

"Was it not in deference to your wish that Sir Geoffrey invited me to Mallingford?"

"Certainly. But may not a young woman wish to see a young man in whom she takes a very warm friendly interest, without the young man repaying her by an offer of marriage? Come—let us be friends—the very best of friends. You are not madly in love with me, you know. It was as much pity for my supposed love-lorn state as anything that led you to make this declaration. Now that you see I am not love-lorn, and you have done your duty by me in giving me the chance you thought I was pining for, there is an end of it."

"I don't understand you one bit."

"Of course not. We women pride ourselves on not being understood. It is the only defense we have, the power of hiding our feelings. Come—let us find papa, and we will forget all about this foolish talk, and be just as comfortable together as we were before."

Jack obeyed rather surlily. It was a change for him to be treated in this light off-hand way by Ethel, after he had been taught to believe that it was his bounden duty to rescue her from the slough of slighted affections. But, though he was really very fond of her, and would doubtless have made her an excellent husband, his pride was more deeply touched than his feelings by her refusal, so there was plenty of room for hope that he would quickly recover from the blow.

Ethel made her way in and out among the well-dressed crowd, in search of her father. She was a little, just a very little, elated at the course things had taken. It was only natural that she should enjoy giving Jack "tit" for his "tat," though she would have avoided doing it if she could; however, she could not blame herself in any degree, and for the life of her she could not help feeling a little pardonable triumph—more especially as she divined rightly the depth of his devotion and guessed he would soon solace himself elsewhere.

She trembled a little as she remembered the close confidence existing between Jack and Pelling. She knew Jack would tell his friend all before he slept that night, and she wondered what would happen then. If, after all, Alec had ceased to love her! The thought was too distressing; so she put it from her resolutely, and tried, with a certain amount of success, to keep her thoughts on other subjects.

Pelling, looking at them when they at last met, guessed that something had taken place. He could see their evident flurry, but he could not tell how matters had fared with Jack. He believed them to be favorable. If it should prove so, his task would be finished; he would have reunited Ethel to the only man she could ever care for, and he would drown his own heart-griets in the excitement of foreign travel.

The men lingered longer than usual in the dining-room that evening, and Ethel found the time hang heavy on her hands. Presently she heard the footsteps of the three cross the hall in the direction of the billiard-room, and she was surprised that they had not asked her to mark for them. She felt nervous and anxious, and was tired of being alone. With this feeling upon her, she decided to get a book, and for a time at least forget the thoughts which oppressed her.

She went to the library and wheeled the steps to a certain shelf that held the works of her favorite authors. There was only one lamp in the large room, but there was a large fire burning in the grate. She was wearing a ruby-colored velvet dress, buttoned up to the throat with large cut-steel buttons that glimmered and sparkled coldly from their warm setting. It was made, in defiance of fashion's stern rule, without frill or puffing and fell gracefully and softly about her shapely figure. When she had reached the top of the library steps, the room door opened, and Capt. Pelling entered. He began to pace in decided agitation up and down the dimly lighted room. Ethel, turning round hastily and seeing who it was, uttered a little exclamation of dismay.

"Miss Ethel! I did not see you. Looking for a book? Aren't you afraid of falling? Come down and let me get it for you." He was at the foot of the steps, his hand outstretched to help her.

"I'm not at all afraid, thank you; and I have not decided on a book yet."

This was not quite true—for she was a little afraid, although not of the steps. She saw even in the dim light a look in his eyes which told of a newly born hope in his heart; and, though she had been longing for the last four months to hear this man tell her he loved her, now that she felt the moment for the avowal was come, she wished to put it off.

"Won't you do without your novel-reading to-night and let me tell you a tale instead?"

Her heart went out to him as she detected a quiver of painful anxiety in his voice.

"If it is a nice tale and ends happily," she answered. "I like all tales to end happily. Does yours?"

"It depends on what you consider happiness; what to you may seem happiness may to me be the depth of despair. Will you come down and listen?"

Ethel descended from her perch and took the chair he had set for her, he seating himself opposite.

"It is a very short story," he began, as he turned up the lamp and stirred the fire. Then he went on—"Once on a time two men loved one woman. They both loved her very dearly, but of course they could not both marry her. Now it happened that the one she loved offended her very grievously, and the one that she did not love tried to ingratiate himself through the favored one's offense. But the cause of offense was suddenly removed, and then the unloved one said to himself, 'Her heart is bound up in this man: she will never know happiness, but as his wife; she does not love me. I will devote my life to making her happy by bringing them together.' Well, he did. He helped the favored man to make him

more worthy of her. It was the one dream, the one ambition of his life, to see them united. Of course there were times when he felt still that he could never know happiness without her himself. He was a selfish beggar at the best; but he really did do all he could for the man she loved. Imagine then his astonishment when the man whom he had thought she loved came to him one day and said, 'It has been all a mistake on your part: she does not care for me at all.' Think what a disappointment it was to the poor wretch who had been working to bring them together at the sacrifice of his own feelings! When he had recovered from the first pang of disappointment, he began to wonder what her refusal meant, and a sudden mad thought came into his head. It was a wild, improbable, unreasonable thought. There were no grounds for it—in fact, all things seemed to point in an opposite direction. Still the thought was in his mind. Shall I tell you what that thought was?" He paused for a moment at this point, and then, moving nearer to her, went on. "He thought that, perhaps, in the great tenderness of her heart, this woman had at first pitied him for a certain unhappiness that clouded his life for a time, that possibly she had overrated his efforts on her behalf, and that, between her feelings of pity and gratitude, she was carried a little out of herself and imagined she ought, as a matter of duty, you know, to marry the man she did not really love. Then he said, 'This must not be; I will go and set her mind at rest, and tell her not to worry about me. I shall be all right by and by, and shall learn in time to be contented without her.'"

Again he stopped. Ethel was looking steadily at the fire; but she did not remove her gaze as she asked:

"And did he go?"

"Yes: he went."

"And what did the woman say?"

"Ah, that is more than I can tell at present!"

"You don't know the end of the story?"

"No; I have come to ask you to finish it for me."

"I see;" with a smile. "This is how I should finish it. The humble-minded man, who did not think it possible that he could be loved for himself alone, went to the woman and told her he should learn to be contented without her in time, upon which the woman rose up and held out her hands, saying, 'But I can never learn to be contented without you, Alec, for I love you very, very dearly!'"

A faint little whisper that sounded like "My own, own love!" floated through the room; and Captain Pelling and Ethel Malling were locked in a close embrace.

* * * * *

"It is very dreadful to have to say it; but I think I began to love you just when it was wrong to do so—on the day you came to tell me you had discovered your wife was living. Then came that unhappy time, and the letters written in Jack's behalf really helped yourself. At last, when I saw you so ill and sorrowful-looking, my heart went out to you."

"This will be an awful blow to Jack!"

"Never mind Jack now. Your kindness has made him think himself a paragon. I think it will do him good to find out that he is not so irresistible as he fancied himself."

Presently, after some further conversation, Ethel said:

"Papa will wonder what has become of us. We had better go and tell him everything. He will be so pleased."

"Do you think so?" Pelling asked, doubtfully; and Ethel, throwing her arms about his neck, answered him with kisses.

Of course Sir Geoffrey was delighted. As a man, he thought as highly of Capt. Pelling as of any one he knew. Besides, he had undoubted advantages of birth and position, and would make an excellent master of the household when the present possessor should have gone to his rest.

Jack was inclined to be displeased at first; but it was characteristic of the facile nature of the man that he consented to be conciliated, and stayed on right into the summer, making Mallingford his headquarters during his trips into the surrounding country to touch up from nature Lord Summers' six pictures. And, as the days lengthened to their longest, Pelling gradually recovered much of his old brightness. Ethel was devoted to him, and there was no sense of shame in her love.

Sometimes people, looking at her radiant young beauty and his grave maturity, wondered at the girl's unconcealed devotion and admiration. One day some one ventured to say something of the kind to her. Her eyes flashed a little, as she answered:

"You don't know him as he really is—if you did, you would not be surprised."

Alec took her to Paris on their wedding-trip, and amid the gayeties of the city they did not forget one day to pay a visit to Pauline's grave. Ethel placed a large wreath of immortelles on the resting-place of her unfortunate cousin, and turned away with a lump rising in her throat. Husband and wife were both very silent on the way back to their hotel. Neither spoke of what was in their mind until after dinner, when Alec, putting his arm round Ethel, said, quietly:

"My great love for you came from the perfect truthfulness of your nature, little wife; if that poor girl had only been like you, she would probably have been a happy, honored wife to-day."

Ethel laid her head upon his shoulder; and though she agreed with her husband, she could hardly tell if she wished it had been so.

They received one visitor before they passed on toward Italy—it was Babette, now Mme. Couronne, of the Boulevard des Italiens. She had invested her five thousand pounds judiciously, and was already becoming rather celebrated as one of the leading modistes of the city. She wished one piece of news to be conveyed to Sir Geoffrey. Messrs. Daws & Raven had made "a flash in the pan" with their two thousand five hundred pounds; they had speculated through a man who was "hammered" the very next settling-day, and so lost every penny. They had taken new offices and furnished them expensively, with the hope of increasing their business, so that, when the crash came, they were in a worse plight than ever.

"They wanted me to join in the same speculation," added Mme. Couronne, "with the money your father had been so generous as to

insist upon my accepting; but you have a proverb, 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' and I kept my money under my own management, as madame sees, with good result."

* * * * *

Erect, white-haired Sir Geoffrey is never so happy as when he is walking out with toddling Geoffrey Malling Pelling, who is to carry on the old family name, by and by. Capt. Pelling is a J. P., and everything else that a country gentleman should be; and, in spite of the many calls on him, he is always able to spend plenty of time in his wife's society. The pleasure these two find in each other's society is as strong to-day as it was on their wedding-tour, and it is likely to increase rather than diminish, for it is a union founded on that most lasting of all foundations—a deep mutual respect and an impregnable faith.

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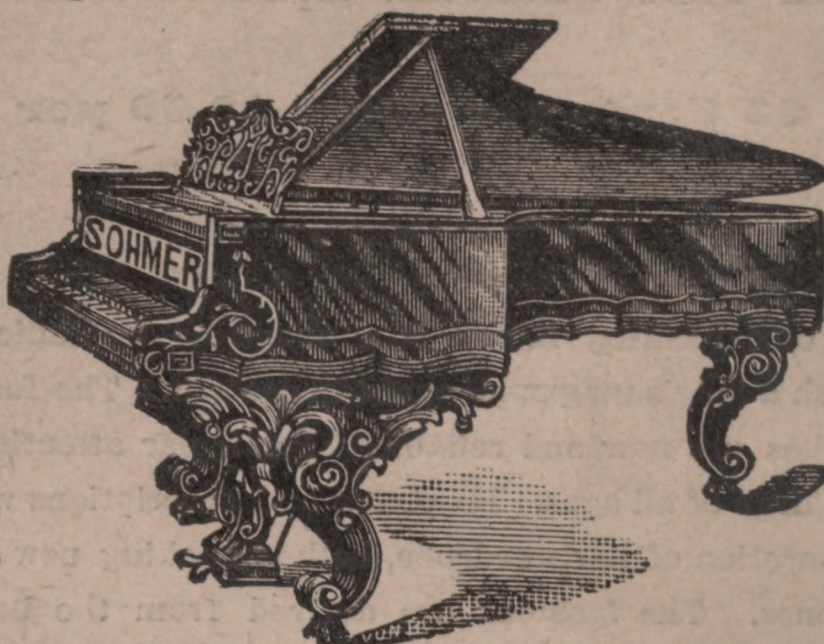
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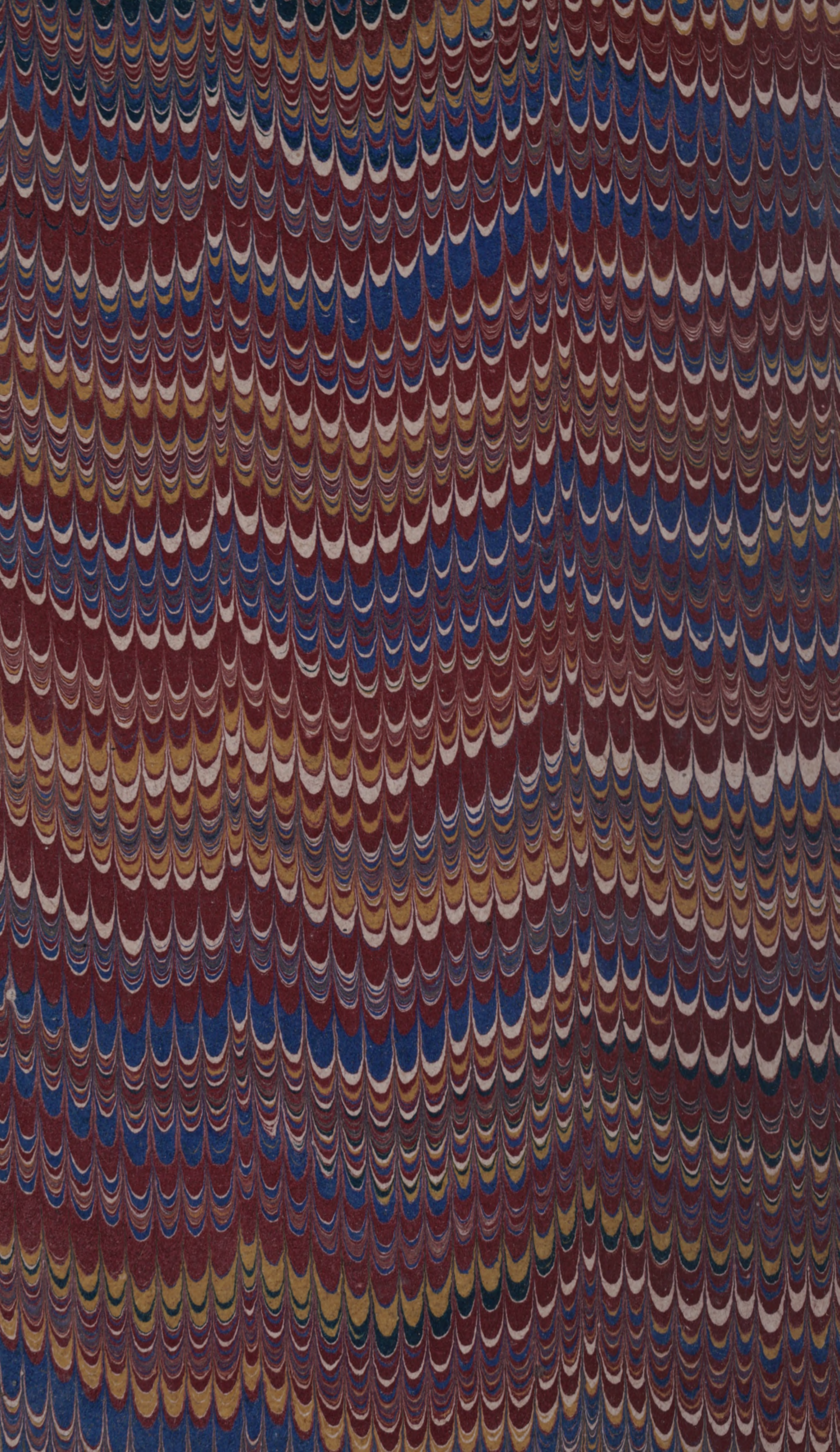
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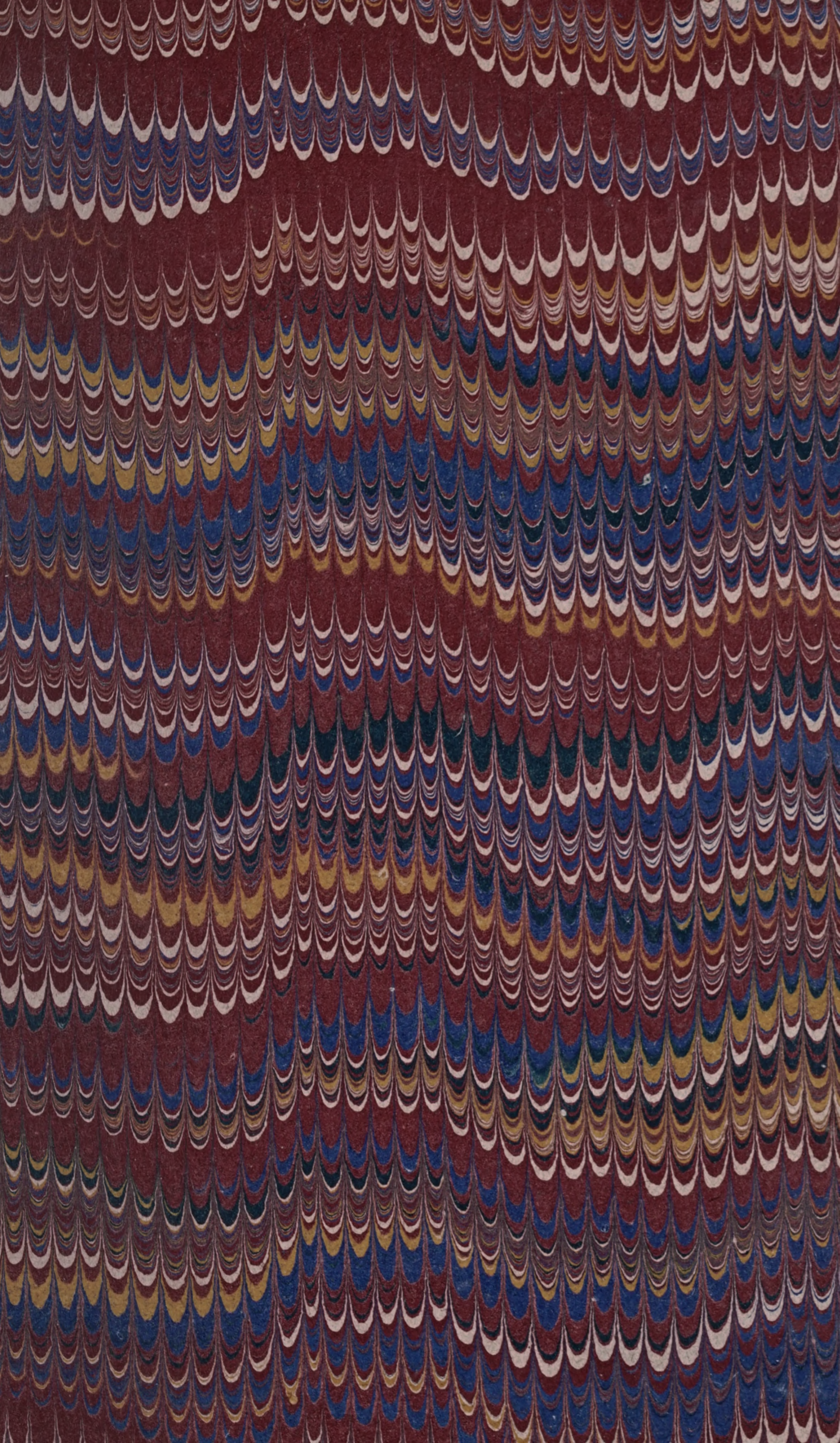
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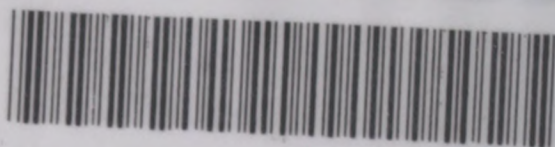
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